

TUNISIA

Tunisia, country of emigration and return

Migration dynamics since 2011

December 2018



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SUMMARY

In the last seven years, **Tunisia has seen a large share of its young population leaving irregularly for Europe, part of which returned forcibly or on their own initiative over the years.** During this timeframe, two major peaks were registered: an upsurge in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution and a new, ongoing increase started in the second half of 2017. Economic and political hardship are largely considered to be behind these migration phenomena. However, a more nuanced understanding of Tunisian emigrants' decision-making process about migration is needed to understand to what extent individual factors contributed to the two major emigration upsurges since 2011. On the other hand, while these large outflows have been accompanied by proportionally comparable figures in terms of forced returns, there is a big knowledge gap with regards to the modalities and the conditions upon return. More information is needed to understand the circumstances under which readmission agreements, as well as voluntary returns, occur, what their implications are on the lives of Tunisian returnees, and to what extent such conditions affect Tunisian returnees' potential for reintegration and development back home.

By looking at emigration and return as equally important phases of the migration cycle, **REACH and Mercy Corps conducted the study** on Tunisian migration entitled: "**Tunisia, country of emigration and return: migration dynamics since 2011**". The study aimed to advance understanding of the (1) socio-economic profiles and (2) decision-making process of Tunisian emigrants leaving their country of origin between 2011 and 2016, and since 2017, 2011 and 2017 being the dates when the two emigration peaks occurred. Secondly, it analysed the (3) livelihoods in Europe, (4) decisions and motives of return, and the (5) conditions upon return of Tunisians who returned to their country of origin after 2011, either by voluntary means or because they were forcibly repatriated.

Data collection took place from 1 to 24 October 2018 in the Greater Tunis area and in the governorates of Sfax, Mahdia and Medenine. A total of 10 key informants (KIs) and 88 male and female Tunisian respondents participated in this study, through 80 in-depth individual interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs).

What are the demographic and socio-economic profiles of Tunisian returnees?

- The vast majority of respondents interviewed in this study were male, single and aged between 18-24 years old. No major differences were found in the profiles of those who left between 2011 and 2016 or after 2017. Most of them came from the governorates chosen for data collection, but also from other coastal and inland governorates, known for being the main regions of emigration in Tunisia.^{1 2}
- **Before leaving Tunisia to Europe, more than half of respondents reported gaining their livelihoods through licit forms of employment (33/56) or, to a much more limited extent, through illicit activities (7/56).**
- The respondents' educational profiles were mixed, but respondents who left since 2017 had overall a higher level of educational attainment.

What are the drivers of Tunisians' decisions to go to Europe irregularly (without visa or other entry permit) since 2011, and what triggered the surge of Tunisians' departures via boat crossing the Mediterranean to Italy since 2017?

- Tunisia's difficult **socio-economic performance (12/80), the persisting unemployment (10/80) and the political crisis (5/80)** were the top three **most commonly reported structural factors** that overall affected respondents' decisions to leave. A higher proportion of respondents who left in 2017-2018, reported that their decisions also resulted from increased **social inequalities**.
- **Poor individual socio-economic conditions and the presence of extended social networks in Europe** were among the main individual drivers shaping interviewed Tunisians' decisions to migrate irregularly to Europe both in 2011-2016 and in 2017-2018.
- **For those who left in 2011-2016, the revolution was a turning point** to start considering the option of emigrating, while **for around one third of respondents who left in 2017-2018 (9/24), not being able to build a family activated the decision-making process about migration.**

¹ According to the Tunisian general census of 2014, Medenine (6820), Tunis (5784), Mahdia (5685) and Nabeul (5495) are the main governorates of origin of Tunisian emigrants, followed by Zaghuan (643), Béja (827), Siliana (947) and Tozeur (378). For more information, please see: Institut National de Statistique, [Statistiques Tunisie - Flash Migration](#) n.3, December 2016.

² Forum Tunisien des Droits Economiques et Sociaux (FTDES), "[Rapport: Migration non réglementaire – Tunisie 2017](#)", Observatoire des Migrations Maghrébines, 2018.

- While the perception that leaving was easier due to low border controls was both a driver and trigger for Tunisians who left in the aftermath of the revolution (9/56), **coming across someone who was perceived as successful was the most commonly reported trigger for respondents who left in 2017-2018 (6/24)**.
- The majority of respondents made autonomous decisions about migration, i.e. without consulting their families. Nevertheless, respondents' household conditions significantly contributed to shaping the migration decisions of a large number of respondents.
- Social networks were important enabling and encouraging factors of Tunisian emigration. **Almost all respondents reported knowing someone who had already migrated abroad (78/80)**, and three quarters of respondents also knew someone who was living at their intended destination (62/80).
- Respondents' perceived differences in terms of Tunisian emigration in 2017-2018 as opposed to the 2011-2016 period included: (1) **increased economic hardship than in the past (26/80)**, (2) **a progressive change in the demographic profile of Tunisian people on the move (14/80)**, with comparatively more women, children and full families joining outward migration flows than in the past.
- **Almost all respondents reported being aware of the existence of regular avenues to reach Europe (74/80)**. Nevertheless, more than half of total respondents reported feeling that they had no other chances to go to Europe but to leave irregularly (37/56 among those left in 2011-2016, and 14/24 of those left in 2017-2018). Yet **around one fifth of respondents had applied for a visa before and had decided to leave irregularly after their application had been rejected**.

What were the livelihoods of Tunisian returnees before leaving Europe?

- Respondents spent, on average, a short time in Europe before returning to Tunisia, which restrained their ability to secure any solid economic or social resources at destination and improve their pre-departure conditions.
- **Once in Europe, only 20 out of 74 respondents managed to find employment** and for half of them, the work found at destination was reportedly unstable or insufficient to enable the respondent to be economically independent (9/74).
- The **challenges faced by respondents in Europe started with their perilous journey** to their intended destination and were likely to have affected their ability to cope with hardship in their daily lives. For **18 out of 74 respondents, access to shelter** was the main preoccupation. Respondents also reported **not having enough to eat (5/74)**, **others felt sick at destination (5/74)** and **had problems accessing healthcare (2/74)**.

Why and how do Tunisians return to Tunisia?

- **Almost two thirds of respondents were forcibly returned to Tunisia (48/74)**, followed by almost one quarter who returned on their own initiative (18/74) and a smaller group of 8 out of 74 respondents who returned through assisted voluntary return (AVR) schemes.
- **Forcibly returned respondents had a very limited time to prepare to their return**. A total of two thirds of respondents were notified their order of removal the same day that the forced return took place (15/48) or up to three days before (18/48) reportedly to mitigate the risk of escape or resistance.
- **Respondents' decisions about AVR were reportedly all taken in the context of unfavourable living conditions** and were linked to general perceptions of hardship at destination, either driven by external or personal conditions.
- Immediately after arrival, forcibly returned respondents reported: having spent a few days in custody (15/48), having paid a fine (9/48), or only having been interrogated by the Tunisian authorities (8/48).

What are the main challenges returnees face once returned in Tunisia?

- In line with what reported by KIs and secondary data, **almost all respondents returned to the Tunisian governorates where they were living before departure (71/74)**. In most cases, the return area also corresponded to the place where the family was located (43/74). Respondents reported returning to those areas specifically because they felt they had nowhere else to go (33/74), or to receive the economic and moral support from their family (32/74).
- **Upon return, returnees reported being employed in low or middle skilled occupations (26/74) or were self-employed (11/74)**, and to be heavily relying on their families' direct or in-kind economic support (25/74).

- **Upon return, respondents' most commonly reported challenges referred to their socio-economic situation back in Tunisia and to feelings of failure or discomfort.** The feeling of having to start again from the ground up was mentioned by one third of respondents (24/74). Slightly less than a third of respondents reported facing economic hardship (22/74) and finding employment (22/74) and unstable forms of employment (12/74) among their main preoccupations.
- Despite the choice made by many respondents to return to their locations of origin, the interaction with their host community was one of the biggest challenges they faced upon return, with **one third of respondents reportedly associating the idea of return with feelings of failure (25/74).**
- **Two thirds of respondents reported intending to re-emigrate in the future (52/74).** The intention to re-emigrate was reported by a slightly higher proportion of forced returnees (34/48), compared to respondents returned on their own initiative (9/18) or through AVR (4/8).

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List of Acronyms

AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
II	Individual Interview
IGO	International Governmental Organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KII	Key Informant Interview
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFII	Office français de l'immigration et de l'intégration / French office for immigration and integration
USD	United States Dollar
TND	Tunisian Dinar

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INTRODUCTION

In the last seven years, Tunisia has seen a large share of its young population leaving irregularly for Europe, part of which returned forcibly or on their own initiative over the years. During this timeframe, **two major peaks were registered: a major upsurge in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution**, when more than 20,000 Tunisians left Tunisia to cross irregularly into Europe,³ **and a new, ongoing increase started in the second half of 2017**. The latter saw Tunisians rapidly turning into the largest group of migrants arriving in Italy, amounting as of 31 December 2018 to 23.8% of all migrant sea arrivals,⁴ compared to 5% as of December 2017.⁵

Tunisia's macroeconomic and political conditions are largely seen as directly or indirectly at the root of these increased migration outflows. Since 2011, Tunisia's poor economic performance and political uncertainty have been fueling feelings of disenchantment and frustration about the change that the 2011 revolution was expected to bring, especially among Tunisian youth.⁶ Many Tunisian migrants who leave for Europe via the sea come from some of the poorest governorates in Tunisia, illustrating a potential link between Tunisian migration outflows and the poor economic performance of Tunisia's inland and southern regions.⁷ Economic and political hardship have been a dominant feature of Tunisia's post-revolution years. Yet, **a more nuanced understanding of Tunisians' decision-making process about migration is needed to understand, whether individual factors can contribute to shed light on the two highest migration peaks to Europe since the revolution 2017**.

Overall, large outflows have been accompanied by proportionally comparable figures in terms of forced returns. Eurostat figures show how efforts to forcibly repatriate Tunisian nationals have increased in the years 2011-2017, with a 359% increase in 2011 compared to 2010, and a 133% increment in 2017 compared to 2016.⁸ Despite the emphasis on forced returns and assisted voluntary returns on the agenda of the European Union (EU) and its member states, and Tunisia's cooperation in this field, information about this phenomenon remains scarce. No comprehensive figures on Tunisians returning on their own initiative are publicly available. Furthermore, the panoply of organisations and schemes providing assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVR-R) to Tunisians abroad makes it difficult to retrieve reliable data on this modality of return. More information is therefore needed to **understand the circumstances under which such agreements, as well as voluntary returns, occur, what their implications are on the lives of Tunisian returnees** and to what extent such conditions affect Tunisian returnees' potential for reintegration and development back home.

By looking at emigration and return as equally important phases of the migration cycle, **REACH and Mercy Corps conducted the study** on Tunisian migration entitled: "**Tunisia, country of emigration and return: migration dynamics since 2011**". The study, funded by the **Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation** and the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands**, aimed to advance understanding of the (1) socio-economic profiles and (2) decision-making process of Tunisian emigrants leaving their country of origin between 2011 and 2016, and since 2017, being 2011 and 2017 the years when the two emigration peaks occurred. Secondly, it analysed the (3) livelihoods in Europe, (4) decisions and motives of return, and the (5) conditions upon return of Tunisians who returned to their country of origin after 2011, either by voluntary means or because they were forcibly repatriated. Data collection took place from 1 to 24 October 2018 in Greater Tunis and in the governorates of Sfax, Mahdia and Medenine. A total of 80 male and female respondents were interviewed for this study.

Three chapters, in line with the phases of the migration cycle, compose this report. The first chapter sheds light on Tunisian emigrants' conditions before departure; the second chapter focuses on the livelihoods and challenges Tunisians faced in Europe, and the third and last one analyses the circumstances and modalities of their return to Tunisia.

³ Boubakri, H., [Les migrations en Tunisie après la révolution](#), *Confluences Méditerranée*, v. 87(4), 2013.

⁴ UNHCR, [Operational Data Portal – Italy](#), Most common nationalities of sea arrivals (since 1 January 2018), last accessed: 07/01/2019.

⁵ Between January and December 2017, 6,151 Tunisians arrived irregularly from Tunisia to Italy, thus representing 5% of all sea arrivals. For more information, please see: UNHCR, [Operational Portal – Refugee Situations](#), Last accessed: 26/10/2018.

⁶ Schafer I. et al., *Youth, Revolt, Recognition The Young Generation during and after the "Arab Spring"*, Institut für Sozialwissenschaften Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2015.

Lixi L., [After Revolution, Tunisian Migration Governance Has Changed. Has EU Policy?](#), Migration Information Source, Migration Policy Institute, 18 October 2018.

⁷ Gallien M. and Herbert M., [What's Behind the Dramatic Rise in Migrant Boats from Tunisia](#), Refugees Deeply, 29 November 2017.

⁸ To access Eurostat statistics, please see: www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study aimed to investigate the role of Tunisia as a country of emigration and return for Tunisians since 2011. The research questions underpinning this assessment are the following:

- **RQ 1:** What are the demographic and socio-economic profiles of Tunisian returnees (both for voluntary and forced return)?
- **RQ 2:** What are the drivers of Tunisians' decisions to go to Europe irregularly (without visa or other entry permit) since 2011, and what triggered the surge of Tunisians' departures via boat crossing the Mediterranean to Italy since 2017?
- **RQ 3:** What were the livelihoods of Tunisian returnees before leaving Europe?
- **RQ 4:** Why and how do Tunisians return to Tunisia?
- **RQ 5:** What are the main challenges returnees face once returned in Tunisia?

Qualitative research methods were used for this assessment. The choice of the indicators and questions for the semi-structured interview guides drew on the migration theories below.

Understanding Tunisians' decisions to leave since 2011 and 2017

The **migration threshold approach** developed by Martin van der Velde and Ton van Naerssen⁹ breaks down (potential) migrants' decision-making process into four stages or thresholds. This approach posits that for migration to occur, an individual needs to:

1. Stop being indifferent about the idea of migrating (*indifference threshold*);
2. Perceive migration as being positive rather than negative;
3. Choose his/her intended destination (*locational threshold*);
4. Decide the trajectory and the means to reach his or her intended destination (*trajectory threshold*).

The process described above applies to migrants' early decisions about whether to stay put or leave their country of origin, but also to their secondary movements. By focusing on migrants' decision-making process, this approach allows to explore how and why Tunisians might have responded differently to a given set of structural conditions in 2011 and in 2017 – the latter being the year when, for the first time, Tunisian emigration sharply increased again since the outflows of 2011. A few indicators are also included to specifically understand how the socio-economic conditions of respondents and of their families played a role in their decisions to leave Tunisia.

Analysing the circumstances affecting Tunisians' experiences of return since 2011

According to Jean-Pierre Cassarino, temporary or permanent returns are to be understood as one of three phases of the migration cycle: (1) **pre-departure conditions**, (2) **migration experience abroad** and (3) **return to the country of origin**.¹⁰

To understand migrants' ability to reintegrate and their potential to promote development back home, such circumstances can be analysed in terms of:

1. **Resource mobilisation:** the social, physical and intangible resources that migrants secured during their stay abroad;
2. **Return preparedness**, composed of migrants':
 - 2.1. **willingness** to return, i.e. the ability to make a free and informed choice on the basis of the expected economic, political and social conditions upon return,

⁹ Van der Velde, M. and van Naerssen T., [People, borders, trajectories: An approach to cross-border mobility and immobility in and to the European Union](#), 2011.

¹⁰ Cassarino J., [Reanalysing the link between return migration and entrepreneurship in the light of the Tunisian example](#), *Révue Méditerranéenne*, n. 124, 2015.

- 2.2. **readiness** to return, which in turn is affected by the resources they could secure while abroad, before returning.¹¹

The interplay of different levels of return preparedness and resource mobilisation affect the degree of completion of migrants' migration cycles. Hence, a migration cycle can be considered:

1. **Complete**, when return is planned and when it results from freedom of choice and awareness that the economic, political and social conditions at home are ripe for return.
2. **Incomplete**, when return is constrained by adverse or unfavourable conditions, i.e.: migrants would have stayed longer abroad, but due to external factors, they deemed that the costs of staying would be higher than the benefits from return (precarious living conditions at destination, family and personal issues etc.).
3. **Interrupted**, when return is prompted by external obligations which make it impossible for a migrant to even evaluate the costs and benefits of return (rejected asylum applications, forced repatriation, family imperatives to return, severe health conditions or the death of a relative, etc.).

Each modality of return affects the migrant's ability to reintegrate and contribute to the development of their country of origin, with the highest level of resource mobilisation, voluntariness and readiness being associated with a complete migration cycle and to higher levels of reintegration.

¹¹ Cassarino J., [Theorising Return Migration: The Conceptual Approach to Return Migrants Revisited](#). *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, UNESCO, 2004, 6 (2).

METHODOLOGY

The research methods used for this assessment were qualitative. Qualitative data was collected through **semi-structured in-depth, individual interviews (IIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs)** with Tunisians having left since 2011, returned on their own initiative, through assisted voluntary return (AVR) programmes, or forcibly repatriated to Tunisia, and interviews with key informants (KIs) selected among researchers, national authorities, local and international governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Population of interest

As this study focuses on the phases of the migration cycle, the population of interest includes all adult Tunisians, both males and females, who **left Tunisia irregularly** since 2011 and **returned** to their country of origin.

Secondary data review

A secondary data review (SDR) was conducted to identify the level of information available and the existing information gaps on Tunisian emigration and return since 2011. The SDR particularly aimed to increase understanding of the demographic and socio-economic profiles of Tunisians returning and departing irregularly from Tunisia to Europe, the main drivers behind their migratory choices since 2011 and since 2017, as well as the conditions faced by returnees once back to Tunisia. SDR findings and existing theories on migrants' decision-making process about migration and on the modalities and impacts of return migration informed the research design for this study and the development of the qualitative data collection tools. The secondary sources consulted also allowed to triangulate the findings emerging from data collection.

Box 1: Pathways into irregularity

A third-country national's unauthorised stay in a country can result from having illegally crossed into the country, but also from:

- Overstaying a visa-free travel period;
- Using forged documents to enter the country;
- Providing false information in those travel documents,
- Losing status either because the residence permit was not renewed or breached its conditions, or because they failed to meet residence requirements;
- Having born in irregularity,
- Not leaving the country after their asylum application was rejected or absconding during the evaluation of the asylum application,
- Failing to enforce a state's return decision.

Morehouse C. and Blomfield M., "[Irregular migration in Europe](#)", Migration Policy Institute, Transatlantic Council on Migration, 2011.

Primary data collection:

Data collection took place during three weeks, from 1 to 24 October 2018, in the Greater Tunis area and in the governorates of Sfax, Mahdia and Medenine. Building on secondary evidence and on information provided by KIs, these sites were chosen for being both significant regions of emigration and return of Tunisians since 2011.

Sampling strategy

A single qualitative tool was developed to address the research questions for this assessment. Building on the concept of migration cycle, Tunisian respondents were asked both about their experience of emigration and, whenever applicable, about their experience of return since 2011. Respondents were therefore sampled on the following criteria:

1. **Having migrated irregularly to Europe,**¹²

¹² In this assessment, Tunisians either entered a European country without a visa, or overstayed their visa and became irregular at destination. For more information, please refer to box 1: Pathways into irregularity.

2. Their **time of departure from Tunisia**:

- a. between 2011 and 2016;
- b. or between 2017 and 2018.

3. **Having returned to Tunisia**:

- a. Individually – on their own initiative;
- b. through AVR schemes;
- c. Forcibly – after having been notified a removal order in their country of destination.

A total of **80 in-depth individual interviews** were conducted with Tunisians who migrated irregularly from Tunisia to Europe since 2011. Out of these:

1. 74 Tunisians returned home, hence they were asked questions both about their emigration and return experience. **Findings on returns to Tunisia since 2011** are, therefore, **based on** data collected by interviewing **74 respondents**.
2. Six failed to reach Europe,¹³ hence they were only asked questions about their emigration experience. Findings about Tunisian **emigration since 2011** are, therefore, **based on** data collected by interviewing **80 respondents**.

Qualitative data was also collected through 10 KI interviews (KIs) and 2 focus group discussions (FGDs) held in the Greater Tunis area, with a total of 8 participants:

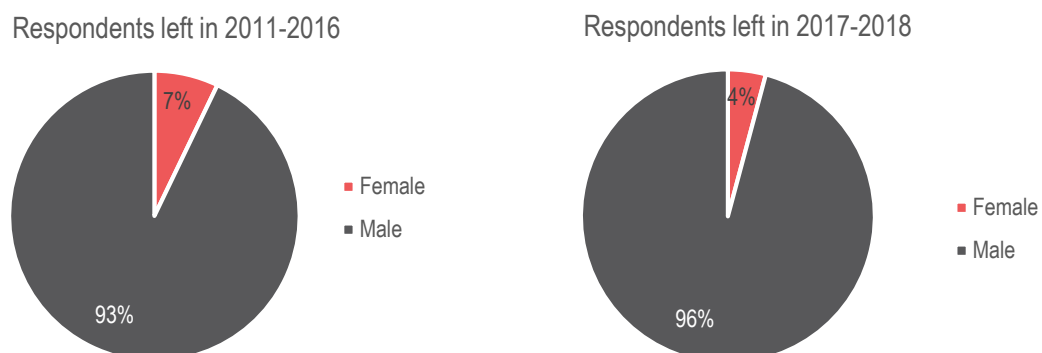
1. One, held with four Tunisians who left Tunisia since 2011¹⁴ focused on Tunisian emigration since 2011;
2. One, held with four Tunisian returnees who migrated irregularly to Europe since 2011 and came back, focused both on emigration and return since 2011.

FGD participants and respondents to individual interviews were sampled purposively on the basis of gender, time of departure from Tunisia and return to their countries of origin. Whenever purposive sampling could not be applied, a snowballing sampling strategy was used instead.

Gender of Tunisian respondents

The vast majority of respondents sampled for this study were young men, in line with official figures on the gender composition of Tunisian emigrants.¹⁵ More specifically, all FGD participants were men and only five women participated in in-depth individual interviews.

Figure 1: Gender of Tunisian respondents



Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018.

¹³ Because they had been intercepted at sea by Tunisian authorities or had to return due to bad weather conditions or problems faced with the engine of the boat.

¹⁴ Two respondents failed to reach Europe and two were returnees.

¹⁵ : UNHCR, [ITALY Sea arrivals dashboard – September 2018](#), 10 October 2018.

Data collection team

A total of five enumerators, three women and two men, were deployed in Tunis, Mahdia and Sfax for this assessment. All were fluent in Tunisian Arabic and French and were supervised by a Project Officer (PO), who provided guidance on the assessment methodology and facilitated the identification of potential respondents. The PO was also responsible of coordinating a data collection mission in the governorate of Medenine. All enumerators were trained on data collection methods and ethical safeguards before the beginning of data collection.

Map 1: Data collection sites



Data processing and analysis

Daily briefing sessions with data collectors were conducted to ensure a smooth progression of fieldwork, with a view to provide guidance and ensure the timely submission of quality data. Data was cleaned on a daily basis and regular communication was ensured to address any issues emerging from fieldwork.

Qualitative data was inputted manually and then transcribed on Microsoft Word. Once cleaned and reviewed, data was manually coded through the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo on the basis of the following criteria:

- **Frequency:** the analysis took into account the number of times a piece of information was reported by respondents. Given the non-probability nature of the sample, this was only considered indicative of patterns of occurrence of a given phenomenon.
- **Specificity:** while taking into account the potential bias of respondents, interviews which contained more detailed accounts with information that could be verified through secondary sources were treated as carrying more weight if contradicting with other information collected during primary data collection.

Limitations

- The approach used for this study is qualitative. The results are therefore to be considered indicative only and cannot be generalised towards the whole population of Tunisian emigrants or returnees since 2011.
- Gender considerations were factored in the research design phase and mixed gender teams were deployed to maximise the chances of including Tunisian female emigrants and returnees among the respondents for this assessment. The proportion of women actually interviewed in this study, however, is limited. While this is in line with figures on the profiles of Tunisian emigrants who recently arrived to Italy - mostly young men with no families - the voices of Tunisian female emigrants and returnees in this assessment could be underrepresented.
- Recent statistics show that the number of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) coming from Tunisia to Europe is on the rise. This assessment, however, only interviewed adult emigrants and returnees. Therefore, the profiles and dynamics of children's migration from Tunisia are not represented.
- Similarly, very few respondents reported having reached Europe with members of their families. While some indicators have been included to assess the impact of household-level considerations on Tunisians' decision-making process about migration, these factors were not covered extensively.

FINDINGS

1. Leaving Tunisia

*This section provides an overview of the phenomenon of Tunisian emigration to Europe since 2011. It explores Tunisian's socio-economic profiles, decision-making processes about irregular migration and journeys to reach Europe. This section is based on data collected by interviewing **80 Tunisians** who migrated irregularly to Europe in 2011-2016 or in 2017-2018.*

KEY FINDINGS

- More than half of respondents was working prior to departure (48/80), mostly in **precarious jobs**.
- Poor socio-economic conditions figured among the most reported structural, individual and household related drivers, together with the presence of extended social networks in Europe.
- **The decision-making process about migration was highly influenced by the revolution** for those who left in 2011-2016, and **by the inability to build a family among those who left in 2017-2018**.
- **Almost all respondents reported being aware of the existence of regular avenues to reach Europe (74/80)**. Nevertheless, **around half of respondents reported feeling that they had no other chances to go to Europe but to leave irregularly – most of them via sea (75/80)**.
- **Italy and France** were the most intended destinations for the vast majority of respondents.

1.1. Tunisian recent emigration to Europe

1.1.1. Cornerstones of Tunisian emigration to Europe since its independence

Tunisian emigration to Europe soared in the aftermath of the country's independence from the French colonial rule in 1956. Starting from the 1960s, the Tunisian government signed bilateral agreements with European countries in need of foreign labour to encourage the emigration of its labour force in order to relieve unemployment and encourage domestic growth through remittances.¹⁶

Starting from the mid-1970s, several European countries, affected by the oil crisis, introduced more restrictive immigration policies to stop the inflow of foreign workers.¹⁷ This choice produced three unwanted effects on Tunisian emigration: (1) it turned from circular to more permanent, (2) it redirected towards new destinations – including to Italy in the 1980s, and (3) as the latest visa requirements were introduced by European countries in the 1990s, irregularity progressively became a dominant feature.

In the 2000s, the cooperation between the Tunisian government, the EU and its member states to fight irregular migration seemed to have borne fruit in containing, but not arresting irregular emigration to Europe.¹⁸ However, Tunisia's social instability and the frustrations of its young population persisted against the backdrop of the European financial crisis, the consequent reduced economic opportunities and legal avenues to reach Europe regularly. During the months after Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was ousted from power, this tension became visible when between January and September 2011, more than 20,000 Tunisian nationals irregularly migrated to Italy via sea.¹⁹

By the end of 2011, border controls were reestablished and the situation stabilised, leading to a decrease in the number of Tunisians reaching Italy irregularly.²⁰ Between January and December 2016, more than 900 Tunisians arrived irregularly to Italy.²¹ A year later, as of December 2017, the number of unauthorised Tunisian arrivals had reached 6,151 individuals, with Tunisians becoming the eleventh most represented nationality among sea arrivals to Italy.²² In 2018, Tunisians ranked first among migrant sea arrivals to Italy, with 5,244 people arrived as of December.²³

¹⁶ Natter K., "[Revolution and Political Transition in Tunisia: A Migration Game Changer?](#)" Migration Policy Institute, 28 May 2015.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Boubakri H., "[Les migrations en Tunisie après la révolution](#)", Confluences Méditerranée, vol. 87, no. 4, 2013.

¹⁹ De Bel-Air F., "[Migration Profile: Tunisia](#)", Migration Policy Centre, Issue 2016/08, December 2016.

²⁰ Lixi L., "[After Revolution, Tunisian Migration Governance Has Changed. Has EU Policy?](#)", Migration Policy Institute, 18 October 2018.

²¹ UNHCR, [ITALY Sea arrivals dashboard – October 2017](#), 16 November 2017.

²² UNHCR, [ITALY Sea arrivals dashboard – January - December 2017](#), 11 January 2018.

²³ UNHCR, [Operational Data Portal – Italy](#), Most common nationalities of sea arrivals (since 1 January 2018), last accessed: 07/01/2019.

1.2. Socio-economic and demographic profiles of Tunisian emigrants since 2011

As of 2016, more than 1,326,000 Tunisians were residing abroad, mostly in France, Italy and Germany.²⁴ The Tunisian diaspora in member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is mostly composed of men of working age, with France presenting the most balanced gender ratio and proportionally the oldest population, due to its historical role as primary destination for Tunisian emigrants.²⁵ Until the 1990s, Tunisian emigrants were mostly low or semi-skilled workers, while more recently, the number of university-educated and high-skilled workers migrating toward Europe went up, as unemployment among university graduates increased.²⁶ On the other hand, the inability of the Tunisian labour market to absorb its highly qualified labour force led to mismatches whereby many highly skilled Tunisians with secondary, vocational, or university-level education are currently working in low-skilled jobs.²⁷

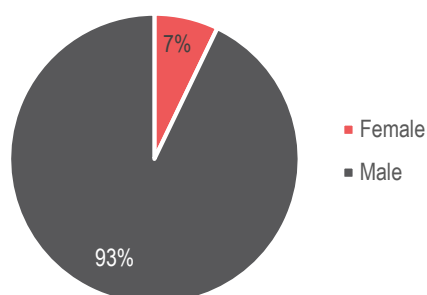
Those who reached Italy in the immediate aftermath of the revolution in 2011 were mostly young men, aged 15-25. The majority was composed of poorly educated or trained people, involved in precarious forms of employment linked to commerce, construction or to the export industry.²⁸ Similarly, among the 5,002 Tunisians arrived in Italy between January and November 2018, 79% were men, while women comprised less than 2%, and 19% were children under the age of 18, 92% of which were unaccompanied and separated.²⁹

1.2.1. Respondents' demographic profiles

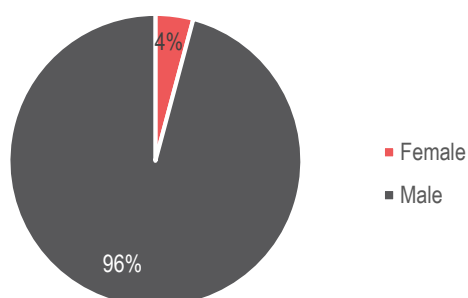
The vast majority of respondents interviewed in this study were male, single and aged between 18-24 years old. No major differences were found in the profiles of those who left between 2011 and 2016 or after 2017, except for the lack of Tunisian respondents aged between 37 and 45 who left after 2017. Bearing in mind that these findings are indicative only, this would be in line with official figures and key informants pointing to an increase in people of young age among recent emigrants from Tunisia to Europe.

Figure 2: Gender of Tunisian respondents

Respondents left in 2011-2016



Respondents left in 2017-2018



Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018.

²⁴ Hatem Bourial, "Ils sont 1.326.000 Tunisiens résidents à l'étranger", Webdo 26 February 2016 (accessed on June 25, 2018)

²⁵ De Bel-Air F., "Migration Profile: Tunisia", Migration Policy Centre, Issue 2016/08, December 2016.

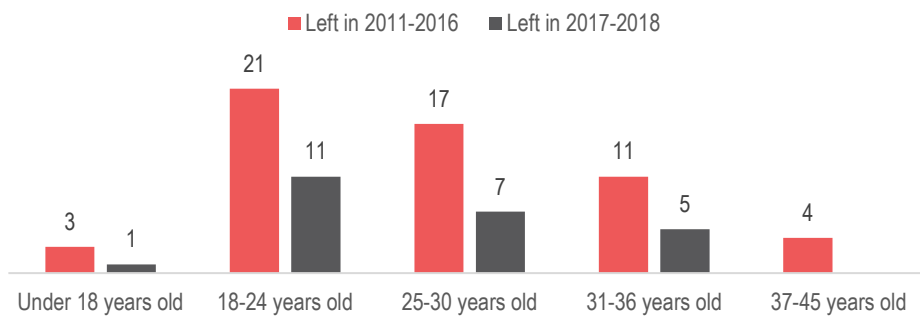
²⁶ Natter K., "Revolution and Political Transition in Tunisia: A Migration Game Changer?" Migration Policy Institute, 28 May 2015.

²⁷ World Bank (IBRD) Observatoire National de La Jeunesse (Tunisia). "Tunisia: breaking the barriers to youth inclusion." 2014

²⁸ Boubakri H., "Les migrations en Tunisie après la révolution", Confluences Méditerranée, vol. 87, no. 4, 2013.

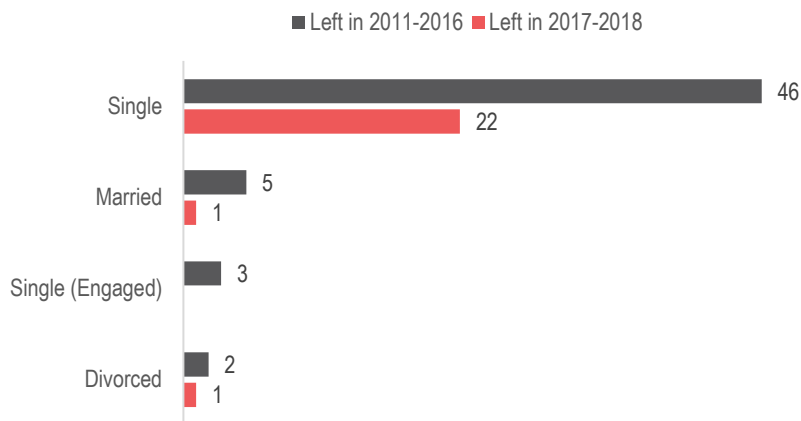
²⁹ Author's own calculations based on: UNHCR, [ITALY Sea arrivals dashboard – November 2018](#), 19 December 2018.

Figure 3: Age of respondents before leaving Tunisia



Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents in 2017-2018.

Figure 4: Marital status of interviewed Tunisian emigrants before leaving Tunisia

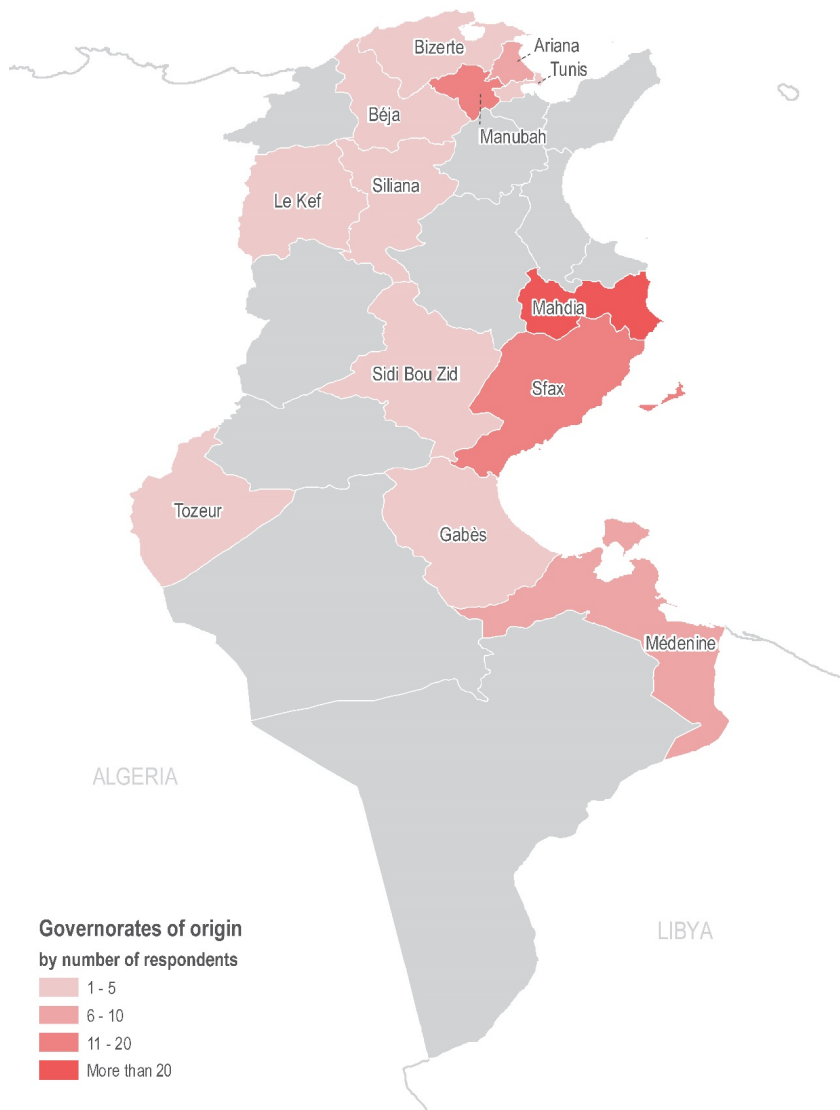


Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018.

1.2.2. Respondents' governorates of origin

The areas of origin of the respondents for this study were the sites where data collection was conducted – Greater Tunis, the governorates of Sfax, Mahdia and Medenine, **but also** the coastal governorates of Bizerte and Gabes, as well as the inland governorates of El Kef, Beja, Siliana, Sidi Bou Zid and Tozeur, which are among Tunisia's main regions of emigration.³⁰

Map 2: Respondents' governorates of origin



Most reported governorates of origin:

1. Governorates chosen for data collection
2. Coastal areas: Bizerte and Gabes
3. Inland areas: El Kef, Beja, Siliana, Sidi Bou Zid and Tozeur

³⁰ According to the Tunisian general census of 2014, Medenine (6820), Tunis (5784), Mahdia (5685) and Nabeul (5495) were the main governorates of origin of Tunisian emigrants, followed by Zaghuan (643), Béja (827), Siliana (947) and Tozeur (378). For more information, please see: Institut National de Statistique, [Statistiques Tunisie - Flash Migration](#) n.3, December 2016 and Forum Tunisien des Droits Economiques et Sociaux (FTDES), "[Rapport: Migration non réglementaire – Tunisie 2017](#)", Observatoire des Migrations Maghrébines, 2018.

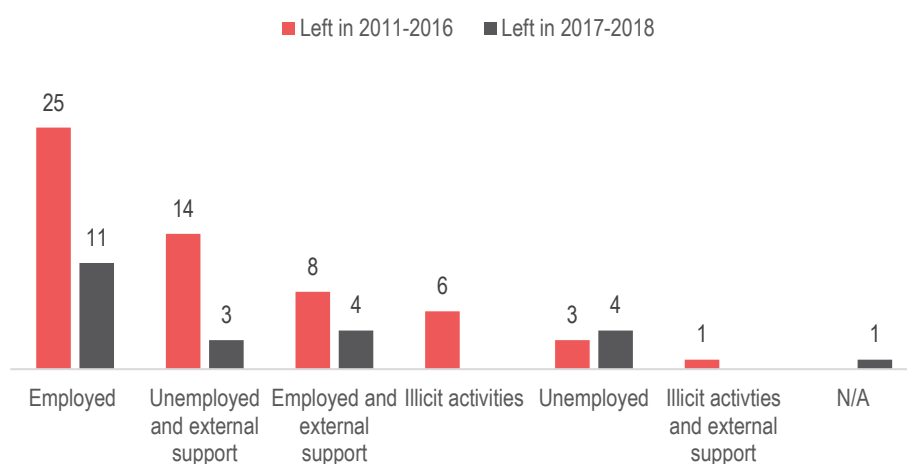
1.2.3. Respondents' socio-economic profiles

Before leaving Tunisia to Europe, more than half of respondents reported gaining their livelihoods through licit forms of employment (48/80),³¹ or to a much more limited extent, through illicit activities (7/56). The forms of employment reported were, however, for both periods, often precarious and unstable and insufficient to cover all respondents' needs. A group of 12 respondents reported working but relying on external support (12/80). A slightly higher number of respondents reported being unemployed but often requiring some external support to make ends meet (17/80). In the majority of cases, such support was provided by the respondents' families and to a very small extent by friends and neighbours.

Top 3 most reported sources of livelihoods prior to departure:

1. Employed in licit activities (36/80)
2. Unemployed (17/80)
3. Employed but in need of external support (12/80)

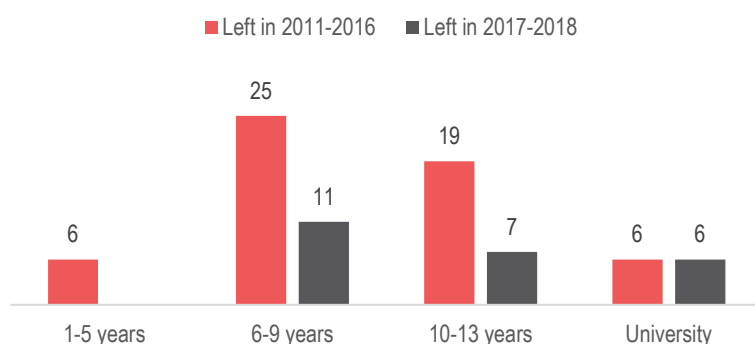
Figure 5: Respondents' most commonly reported livelihoods before departure



Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018.

The respondents' educational profiles were mixed, but those who left since 2017 had overall a higher level of educational attainment. Overall, the majority of respondents attended between 6-9 or 10-13 years of school, but respondents who left in 2017-2018 reported having attended university proportionally more than respondents who left in 2011-2016. All of those who left in 2017-2018 completed more than 5 years of schooling. While this could owe to sampling biases, this is aligned with KIs' views that the level of educational attainment among recently-emigrated Tunisians is higher than in the past.

Figure 6: Respondents' educational profile



Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018.

³¹ Both among those who left in 2011-2016 (33/56) and among those who left in 2017-2018 (15/24).

1.3. Drivers of emigration since 2011

Tunisian emigrants interviewed for this assessment reported that their decisions to migrate to Europe resulted from the interplay of **structural factors** in their country of origin, along with **personal conditions** and household-related and other meso-level factors.

1.3.1. Structural drivers of Tunisian emigration since 2011

The events leading to the 2011 revolution and the current dynamics in Tunisian emigration are closely intertwined.³² Between 2005 and 2008, unemployment had almost doubled, reaching, on the eve of the revolution, a rate of 31% among young people aged 15 to 24 years old.³³ Social discontent about structural unemployment and a lack of prospects among the increasingly well-educated youth fuelled Tunisia's demand for change and led to the overthrow of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime. In the aftermath of the revolution, weaknesses in border enforcement linked to political uncertainty, facilitated the upsurge of departures.³⁴ Almost 30,000 Tunisians were apprehended off the Tunisian coasts and more than 20,000 Tunisians were estimated to have reached Italy in the same year.³⁵

The 2011 upsurge was temporary but irregular departures to Europe did not stop. In the aftermath of the revolution, hopes for change, especially among the Tunisian youth remained frustrated. Political uncertainty and security concerns led to a nearly 20% drop of foreign direct investments (FDI) and to a collapse of key economic sectors, such as tourism, which once represented nearly 6.5% of Tunisia's gross domestic product (GDP).³⁶ The unemployment rate among those with advanced education slightly increased from 41.8% in 2011 to 42% in 2013.³⁷

Seven years after the outbreak the revolution, at the beginning of 2017, a new wave of protesters took the streets of Tunisia to demonstrate against the deterioration of their living conditions and ask for more dignified living standards. In 2017, the national GDP increased by almost 2 percent compared to 2016,³⁸ but the unemployment rate reached 15.4% and went up to 46% among unemployed youth. The same year inflation rose from 4.5% in January 2017 to 8% in July 2018.³⁹ The elevated turnover rate among politicians, and the distrust towards their ability to deliver on their promises intensified tensions between the government and civil society.⁴⁰

1.3.2. Respondents' most commonly reported structural drivers

Difficult structural conditions are reflected in respondents' decisions to leave their country. **Tunisia's poor socio-economic performance (12/80), the persisting unemployment (10/80) and political instability (5/80) were the top three most commonly reported structural factors** that overall affected respondents' decisions to leave. A higher proportion of respondents who left in 2017-2018, reported that their decisions also resulted from increased social inequalities.

Most reported structural drivers:

1. Poor macro-level socio-economic conditions (12/80)
2. Unemployment (10/80)
3. Political instability (5/80)

Mostly among those who left in 2017-2018: social inequalities (3/24)

"The situation of the country and the state of unemployment that everybody suffers from encouraged me to take the decision to leave."

35-year old man from Sfax, left in 2016

³² Herbert M, "[At the edge. Trends and routes of North African clandestine migrants](#)", The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Institute for Security Studies, ISS paper 298 | November 2016.

³³ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), Subregional Office of North Africa, "[Tunisia: Economic situation and outlook in the current transition phase](#)", 2014.

³⁴ Herbert M, "[At the edge. Trends and routes of North African clandestine migrants](#)", The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Institute for Security Studies, ISS paper 298 | November 2016.

³⁵ European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), "[Tunisia's Migration Dilemma](#)", 11 June 2018.

³⁶ <https://international-review.org/tunisian-success-an-economic-analysis/>

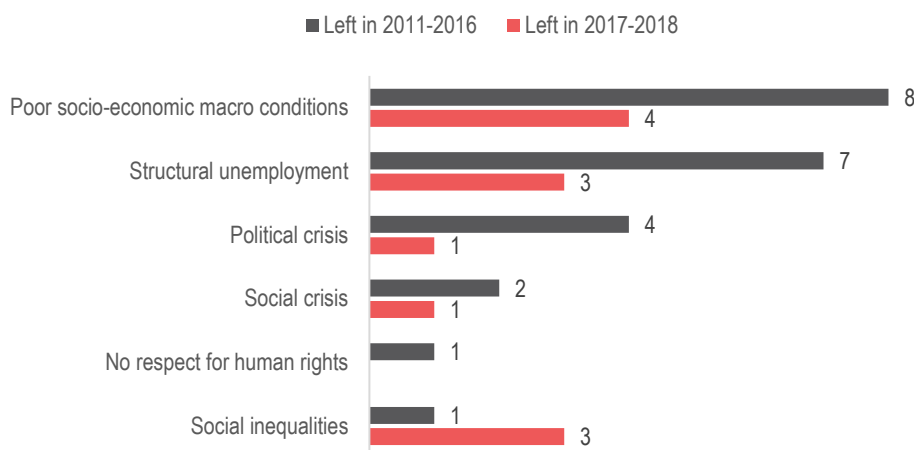
³⁷ World Bank, "[Unemployment with advanced education \(% of total labor force with advanced education\)](#)" - Tunisia, last accessed on 20/11/2018.

³⁸ World Bank, "[GDP growth \(annual %\)](#)" - Tunisia, last accessed on 20/11/2018.

³⁹ Lixi L., "[After Revolution, Tunisian Migration Governance Has Changed. Has EU Policy?](#)", Migration Information Source, Migration Policy Institute, 18 October 2018.

⁴⁰ ESCR-net, "[Reporting on protests linked to economic and social issues in Tunisia](#)", 17 March 2017.

Figure 7: Respondents' most reported structural drivers to Tunisian emigration in 2011-2016 and in 2017-2018



Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018.

1.3.3. Individual drivers of Tunisian emigration

Poor individual socio-economic conditions and the presence of extended social networks in Europe were among the main individual drivers shaping interviewed Tunisians' decisions to migrate irregularly to Europe. **Firstly, around half of interviewed Tunisians emigrated because they knew someone who had already migrated irregularly (43/80).** The social embeddedness of Tunisians' choices about irregular migration emerges

Most reported individual drivers:

- Knowing someone who already left (43/80)
- No or unstable unemployment (36/80)
- Individual socio-economic challenges (28/80)

"I worked as a painter for several months. I was never satisfied with my situation. I decided to leave because I don't want to live in need anymore. I was ashamed when I asked my parents for money."

30-year old man from Mahdia, left in 2014

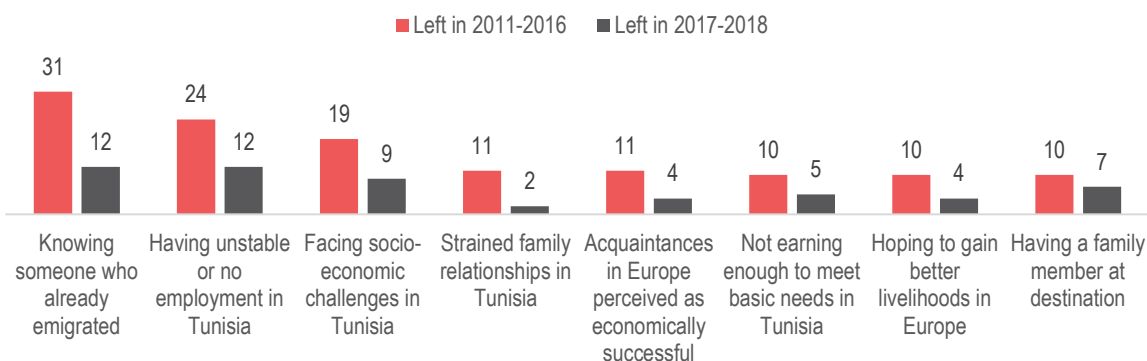
"My conditions were bad. I worked as a fisherman, which is not a regular job. I stayed jobless for days and here in Sidi Mansour you cannot do anything else but being a fisherman. I left to ameliorate my situation. I want to get married and have my own car and house like everybody else."

21-year old man from Sfax, left in 2017

also among one third of respondents who left in 2017-2018 (7/24) and one sixth of respondents who left in 2011-2016 (10/56), who went to Europe because they had a family member at destination. Secondly, overall, the **individual socio-economic conditions of respondents played a key role in shaping Tunisia's emigration both in 2011 and in 2017.** Among the Tunisians interviewed for this study, **almost half reported being unemployed or having very unstable sources of livelihoods**

(36/80), more than one third reported facing socio-economic challenges (28/80), or striving to meet their basic needs with the economic resources available before leaving (15/80).

Figure 8: Most reported individual drivers of Tunisians' emigration since 2011



Total: 56 respondents emigrated in 2011 - 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018. Multiple answers could apply.

1.3.4. Crossing the migration indifference threshold: respondents' decision-making process

Overall, respondents made autonomous decisions about emigrating irregularly to Europe. Regardless of the timeframe of their departure, almost half of respondents did not inform anyone about their decision to leave (37/80). Proportionally, though, among those who left from 2017, a higher number of respondents (9/24) informed their friends rather than their family, compared to those who left in 2011-2016 (10/56) mostly not to worry them or because they had taken sudden decisions about their journeys to Europe.

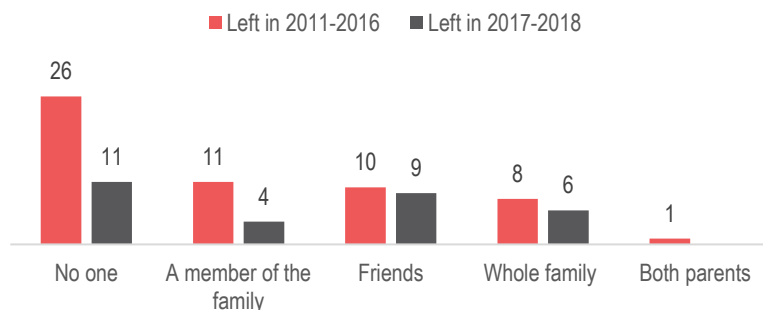
Decision-making process about migration activated by:

- **2011 revolution** (respondents left in 2011-2016)
- **Inability to build a family** (resp. left in 2017-2018)

Triggers of the decision to leave:

- **2011 revolution** (resp. left in 2011-2016)
- **Coming across successful emigrants** (resp. left in 2017-2018)

Figure 9: Most commonly reported people informed about the decision to emigrate irregularly



Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents emigrated in 2017-2018.

For those who left in 2011-2016, the revolution was a turning point to start considering the option of emigrating. Some respondents reported a sense of normalcy given by the feeling that everyone around them was leaving or had left (9/56). For other respondents, the idea of emigrating became more tangible when they learned about this possibility from family members living abroad (8/56), or through acquaintances who had already made it to Europe.

For around one third of respondents who left in 2017-2018 (9/24), the decision-making process about migration was activated by the awareness of being unable to build a family, with some reporting having been rejected by their partners' families because they lacked the economic resources to support the future household.

I was single then and I am single now. I wish I could get married and have kids in a country where there is a future. There is no way that I get married in Tunisia."

28-year old man from Sfax, left in 2013

On the other hand, for around one seventh of respondents (13/80), most of whom had left in 2011, having strained relations with their families was an important driver to leave for

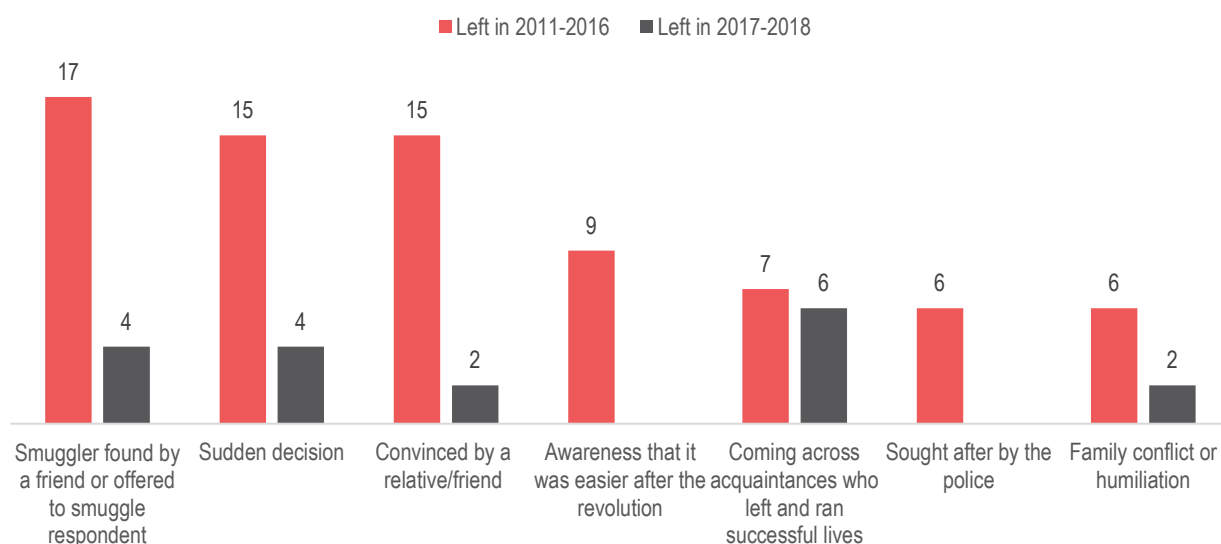
Europe, while three respondents reported having been driven by the desire of making their families proud of their achievements (3/80).

Final decisions about migrating irregularly were reportedly - directly or indirectly - influenced by respondents' social networks. In the majority of cases, respondents explained that their decision to leave responded to a friend's proposal, either because he had found a smuggler willing to take them to Europe or because he was a smuggler himself (17/56 and 4/24). In most cases when the decision to leave was described as sudden, it resulted from a conversation with friends in cafés, fed by a desire of adventure and matched by easy access to the means to travel irregularly (15/56 and 4/24). **While the perception that leaving was easier due to low border controls was both a driver and trigger for Tunisians who left in the aftermath of the revolution (9/56), coming across someone who was perceived as successful was the most commonly reported trigger to leave for respondents who left in 2017-2018 (6/24).**

"During the revolution period, [...] people used to leave every day. I felt that it became easier and less risky. Also, it felt like there were no men any more in the city, they had all left. I could only see women and elderly people in the street. I felt like I was the only one staying, so I had to leave too!"

35-year old man from Medenine, left in 2011

Figure 10: Most commonly reported triggers of the decision to migrate irregularly



Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018. Multiple answers could apply.

Box 2: Female respondents' decision-making about migration

Only five women were interviewed in this assessment. Nevertheless, more than a third of respondents who departed by boat between 2011 and 2016 (18/53) and in 2017-2018 (8/22) reported the presence of at least one woman on the boat. One 28 year-old male respondent, who left from Medenine in 2011 and 2018 even reported: *“There were around 40 women, some came with their babies and few were pregnant.”*

Overall, female respondents' decision-making process did not diverge from other male respondents, except for gender-specific inequalities reported within the household. In particular, two women reported episodes of personal humiliation and physical abuse within their household before leaving Tunisia (2/5), while three female respondents reported not being responsible for the decision to leave nor the trajectory to take, which was taken instead by a family member or a significant other (3/5).

“I was really tired of the situation. Even during the most difficult moments I experienced in Italy and France, I had only this image of Tunisia: me being pulled by my hair in the street and being hit and the fact that my mother loved my brother more than anything. I never forgot that day. During that time, I started thinking about running away from my family.” (35 year-old female respondent from Greater Tunis, who left in 2011).

Challenges faced by women upon their return were similar to those reported by male respondents. However, almost all female respondents were overall happy about their return, especially due to (4/5):

“I was proud. I am a woman and I came back home with money. I have a place in my family now.” (37 year-old female from Greater Tunis, who left in 2013).

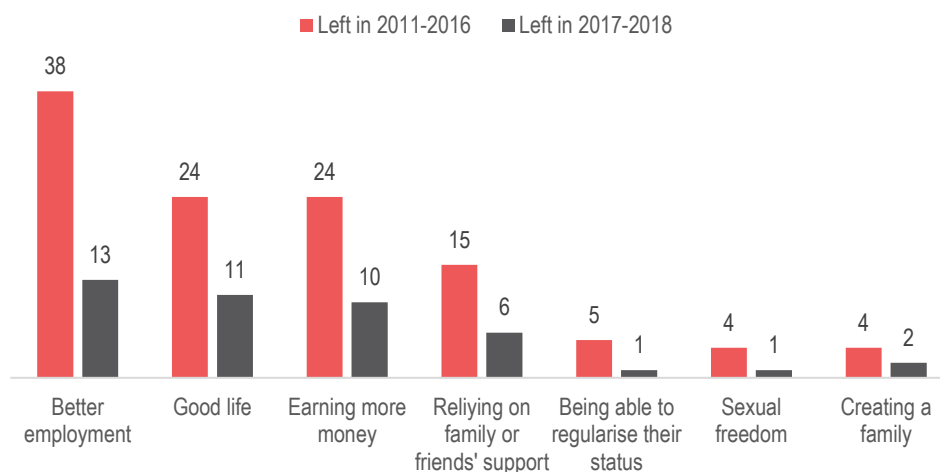
Only one female respondent reported not being satisfied with her return, in line with most of male respondents' accounts: *“I was depressed. I had feelings of failure.”* (26 years old woman from Greater Tunis, who left in 2016).

Very often, respondents reported how knowing Tunisians living in Europe and occasionally returning home with money and fancy cars, contributed to the construction of respondents' notions of **wealth and “good life” in Europe**. Not surprisingly, respondents primarily reported expecting to find a job, earning more money, and having a good life in Europe. The latter was defined by most respondents as living in a country where full respect of human rights, freedom and peace are guaranteed.

“I have a lot of friends who went to Europe two years ago. They were living in the same situation as I was. Now, they are living a way better life than I am, they all went back to Tunisia with their papers, they bought cars, got married, built houses. You will never be able to do this if you stay in Tunisia.”

23 year old man from Mahdia, who left in 2017

Figure 11: Most commonly reported expectations about Europe



Total: 56 respondents emigrated in 2011 - 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018. Multiple answers could apply.

1.3.5. Household and social-network related drivers about emigration

As indicated earlier, interviewed Tunisians' decisions about irregular migration were found to be markedly influenced by the social environment in which respondents were immersed, both at the household-level, and through the extended social networks of peers and acquaintances in Tunisia and at destination.

Respondents' household conditions significantly contributed to shaping the migration decisions of a large number of interviewed Tunisian emigrants.

The majority of respondents who replied to questions about their households' socio-economic conditions explained coming from a poor household (46/80), with a total of 19 out of 80 respondents who reported having sent remittances back home, both in 2011-2016 (13/56) and in the 2017-2018 period (6/24). Twelve respondents also explicitly reported having replaced one of their parents in supporting their family, due to the death or illness of at least one of them. A quarter of respondents (19/80) reported, instead, that their migration was not directly intended to ameliorate the economic conditions of their families.

"It's utter misery. My family is very poor. With my father being handicapped, my sister's situation [cancer] and my mother cleaning houses for 20 dinars, it was too much for me. I was unemployed, I tried to work but I couldn't find any jobs. That's why I decided to leave: to gain money and support my family."

24-year old man from Greater Tunis, left in 2017

Almost all respondents reported knowing someone who had already migrated abroad (78/80), and three quarters of respondents also knew someone who was living at their intended destination (62/80). This evokes the role that the culture of emigration, and the sense of normality associated to migration, in which respondents were immersed, is likely to have played in respondents' decisions to leave.

1.3.6. Respondents' perceptions of how emigration in 2017-2018 differs compared to emigration in 2011-2016

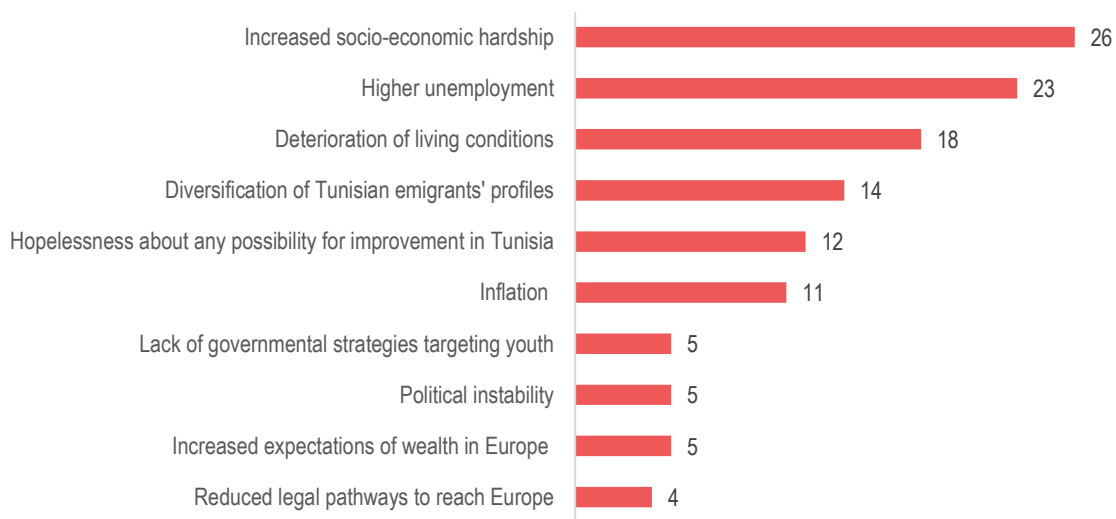
Respondents were asked how the most recent emigration dynamics since the upsurge in 2017-2018 differed compared to the 2011-2016 period. Out of the 80 respondents, **almost one third reported that recent emigration was linked to increased economic hardship than in the past (26/80)**, one quarter pointed to the elevated unemployment rate (23/80) and to a severe deterioration of the living conditions in Tunisia (18/80). For a small number of respondents, the major differences consisted in the increased expectations of wealth in Europe, boosted by the example of acquaintances who already lived there (5/80) and in the reduction of legal avenues available to reach Europe regularly (4/80).

Most reported changes between 2011-2016 and 2017-2018 emigration:

- More economic hardship
- More unemployment
- More difficult living conditions
- More women, more children, more families leaving

Other respondents perceived a progressive change in the demographic profile of Tunisian people on the move (14/80), with comparatively more women, children and full families joining outward migration flows than in the past. A few of them reported that this increase is linked to the fact that women and children are perceived as more vulnerable and therefore are less likely to be forcibly repatriated once in Europe. Some KIs rather explained that in terms of a progressive transition of emigration from being an individual livelihood strategy towards a more household-related one, whereby families do not only support the emigration of young members of their family, but also join such migration outflows. The indicators chosen for this assessment, however, do not allow to strongly support nor discard these views. The only indication concerns respondents' decisions, which, for half of respondents were made by respondents on their own, without consulting their families (37/80).

Figure 12: Most commonly reported differences perceived in emigration in 2017-2018 compared to the 2011-2016 period



Total: 80 respondents left since 2011. Multiple answers could apply.

1.4. Irregular journeys from Tunisia to Europe

1.4.1. Crossing the trajectory threshold: how did respondents intend to reach their destination?

Almost all respondents reached Europe by crossing the Mediterranean via boat (76/80). All the remaining four entered Europe regularly and overstayed their visa travel period (4/80). While these two were the most commonly reported emigration modalities, respondents reported being aware of a plurality of more expensive but safer ways to reach Europe irregularly, such as paying for an employment contract or a fake citizenship to obtain a travel visa for Europe more easily, purchasing a short-term touristic visa or marrying a European national. None of them had tried to use those pathways before.

Almost all respondents reported being aware of the existence of regular avenues to reach Europe (74/80). Nevertheless, **more than half of respondents reported feeling that their only chance to go to Europe was to leave irregularly (37/56 among those left in 2011-2016 and 14/24 of those left in 2017-2018).** This was explained by the fact that respondents felt that they did not meet the requirements to get a visa, or because the application fees were deemed too high to even try to apply, or also because migrating irregularly was perceived as the normal way to do it. Yet **around one fifth of respondents had applied for a visa and had decided to leave irregularly after their application had been rejected (8/56 and 5/24).** Some respondents, who had their visa application rejected despite reportedly meeting all the requirements, described the process as frustrating and unjust, adding that access to regular pathways is reserved to people already endowed with a consolidated social and economic status.

Why leaving irregularly?

1. Lack of legal avenues (51/80)
2. Visa application was rejected (13/80)
3. Everybody leaves irregularly (2/80)

"The pathways I know to reach Europe:

1. *"Irregular Immigration by boat.*
2. *[Applying for a] visa, but they don't give it to people like us. They only give it to the rich and to "high-level" people. I was refused a visa from France in 2017, even though I met all the requirements (I even had social security!). They told me that they hadn't accepted my visa application because they knew that I would overstay my visa period.*
3. *Talk to people who will buy you a visa (20,000-25,000 euros).*
4. *I also hear about people who get a short-term tourist visa and overstay."*

27-year old from Medenine, left in 2016

Figure 13: Most commonly reported reasons for migrating irregularly to Europe



Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018. Multiple answers could apply.

Among the four respondents who overstayed their visa travel period, three reported having planned it before leaving Tunisia.

In the remaining case, the decision to overstay was triggered by the non-renewal of the respondent's employment permit once in Europe, but the respondent had considered this option since departure. One respondent became irregular to be able to continue visiting Italy beyond the 90 days allowed by his tourist visa for fear of not being granted this opportunity in the future, and then returned home on his own initiative.

“Young people tend to embark upon adventures to discover new countries. Since 2016, the restriction of channels for work-related migration and the lack of employment and cultural exchange agreements between European countries and Tunisia have indirectly promoted the irregular emigration of young Tunisians (graduates and non-graduates), including by overstaying their visas.”

21-year old man from Greater Tunis, left in 2017

1.4.2. Crossing the locational threshold: what destination did respondents intend to reach before leaving Tunisia?

Before leaving Tunisia, **most respondents intended to reach Italy (47/80) and France (22/80) as their main destinations.** Fewer respondents wished to go to Germany (3/80), Belgium (3/80) or any other country in Europe (3/80). Italy was reportedly perceived by respondents both as a destination and a country of transit. In the latter case the actual destination would mostly be France, which hosts the largest community of Tunisians abroad and which was reportedly perceived as offering better employment opportunities than southern European countries.

Most intended destinations:

1. Italy (47/80)
2. France (22/80)
3. Germany (3/80), Belgium (3/80), any country in Europe (3/80)

The coasts of the governorates of Sfax and Mahdia were the most reported embarkation areas for the respondents who participated in this assessment. Some left from the city of Sfax or along its coastline (16/56 among those who left in 2011-2016 and 6/24 among those who left in 2017-2018), despite Sfax not being the location where the highest number of individual interviews were conducted. Some respondents actually also reported having left from the Greater Tunis to leave from Sfax, which is one of the locations where most boats take off to Europe.⁴¹ Fewer respondents left from the Kerkennah islands, in the governorate of Sfax (10/56 and 2/24) and from Chebba, in the governorate of Mahdia (8/56 and 3/24). **Lampedusa was the most commonly reported arrival point by the majority of respondents who left both in the period 2011-2016 (41/56) and 2017-2018 (14/24),** followed by the main island of Sicily (3/56 and 2/24).

⁴¹ Bobin F., [La détresse sociale en Tunisie à l'origine d'une nouvelle vague d'émigration](#), Le Monde, 24 April 2018.

Map 3: Most commonly reported embarkation and arrival points



Almost one fifth of respondents migrated internally before crossing into Europe (15/80). Djerba (4/15), Sfax (3/15), Gabes (3/15) and Nabeul (3/15) were the most commonly reported locations where respondents went either to seek employment (8/15) or to study (2/15).

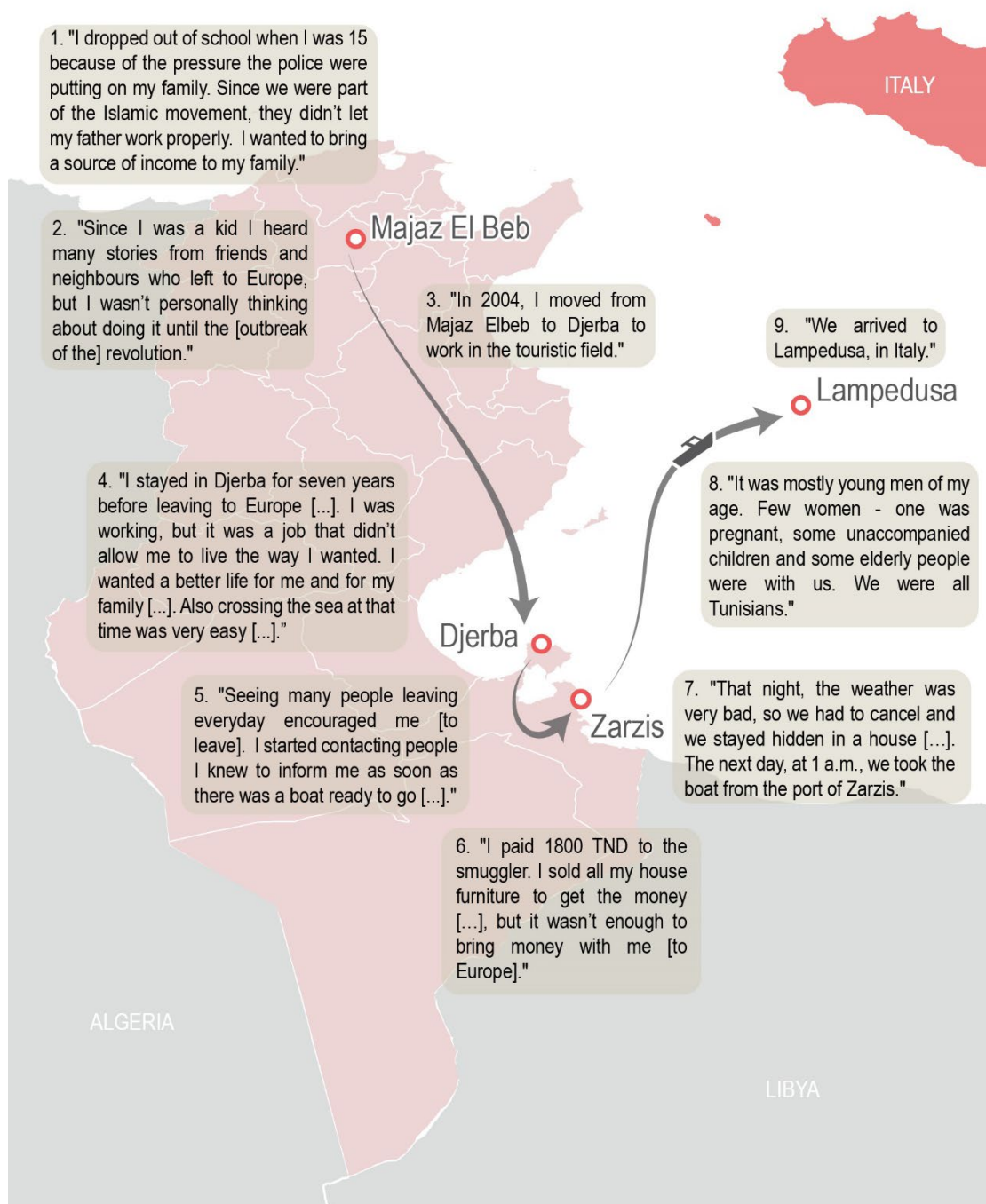
One eighth of respondents made the irregular journey to Europe more than once (10/80), from two up to four departures. This range also includes failed attempts (10/80) to reach Europe, because respondents had been intercepted at sea by Tunisian maritime forces or due to boat issues or bad weather conditions. The vast majority of respondents made the journey to Europe once (70/80).

Respondents overall reported having a very limited amount of time to prepare before the journey. Most respondents travelled with a few clothes, some money, food and not always with their papers. Eleven respondents reported having taken nothing with them, especially when they took sudden decisions about departure, following the example of a peer.

"You think a little bit before taking a final decision: to leave or to stay. You only have 24 hours to decide on what the rest of your life will be. It's a lot of anxiety. You don't have much time to get ready, they only inform you one day before the departure. I only took clothes to change and a toothbrush, a portable battery, hair gel and tobacco with me. I didn't take my passport. I told myself that if I got stuck, I'd say that I'm Algerian or Syrian".

29 year-old man from Sfax, left in 2015

Case study 1: From internal to international migration

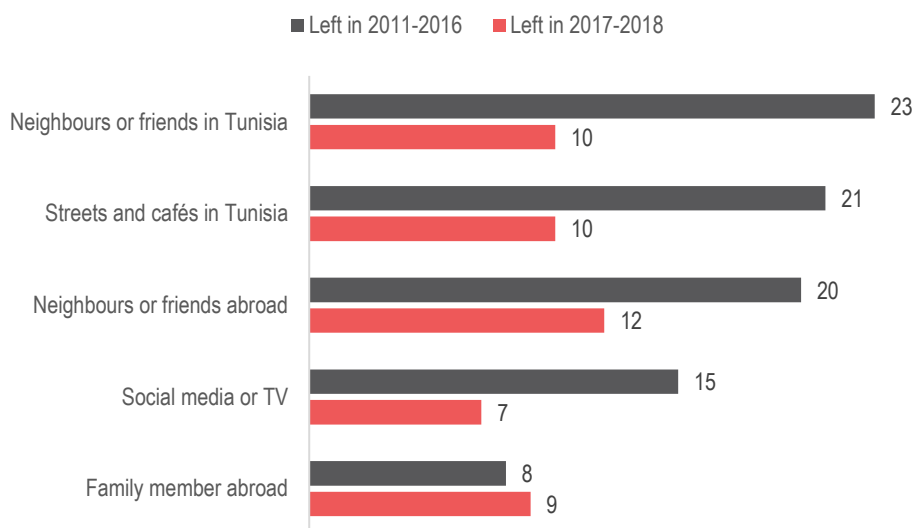


1.4.3. Respondents' most reported sources of information about irregular migration

The majority of respondents who left in 2011-2016 reported having learned about the possibility of **emigrating** irregularly through neighbours or friends living in Tunisia (23/56) or abroad (20/56), or through common discussions in cafés and public spaces (21/56). **Half of respondents who left since 2017 (12/24), reported that friends abroad were slightly more of a source of information than acquaintances in Tunisia (10/24).**

For almost one quarter of respondents, **neighbours or friends already living in Europe were the most commonly reported source of information about the trajectory and conditions of the journey.**

Figure 14: Most reported sources of information about irregular emigration



Total: 56 respondents emigrated between 2011 and 2016, and 24 respondents left in 2017-2018. Multiple answers could apply.

1.4.4. Crossing the trajectory threshold: how did respondents reach Europe?

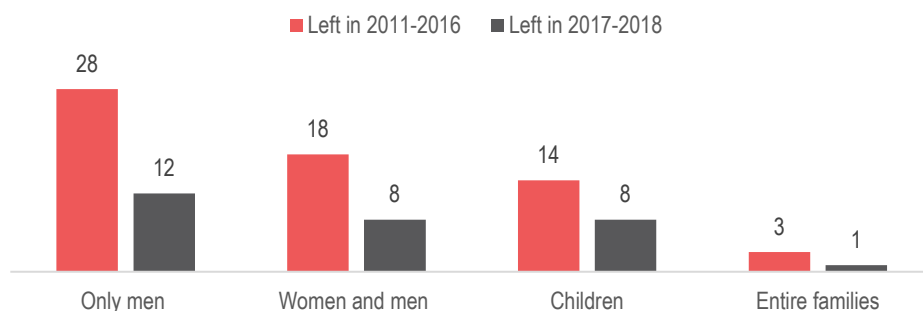
The vast majority of respondents (75/80) took the sea via boat, while only five respondents reported having travelled by plane. Boats were reportedly piloted by a smuggler or, in fewer cases, by the respondent or by a group of friends who had sailing skills. In very few cases, respondents reported having paid to travel on board of a merchandise boat.

Most reported pathways to irregularity:

1. Via sea (75/80)
2. Visa overstay (5/80)

Half of respondents reported having travelled with members of their family, friends or colleagues (34/76).⁴² In equal proportion for respondents who left in 2011-2016 and 2017-2018, half of respondents reported that all the other passengers on the boat were men only, while **around one third reported the presence of at least one woman onboard**. The proportion of respondents reporting the presence of children was slightly higher among more recently emigrated respondents (8/24 left in 2017-2018, compared to 14/56 who left in 2011-2016).

Figure 15: Demographic profile of boat passengers, by gender and age



Total: 76 respondents who reached Europe by boat.

With regards to the nationality of the other passengers, 11 out of 80 respondents reported having travelled with sub-Saharan African migrants, mostly in the period 2011-2016 (9/56), Libyans (2/80) and Algerians (1/80). Almost all of them had left in 2011 and were likely part of the large exodus of migrants who fled Libya after the outbreak of the revolution.⁴³

⁴² A total of 76 respondents who reached Europe via sea.

⁴³ Boubakri H., "Les migrations en Tunisie après la révolution", Confluences Méditerranée, vol. 87, no. 4, 2013.

Box 3: The emigration of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). A phenomenon on the rise.

Statistics on sea arrivals to Italy show an increase in the number of Tunisian UASC. While Tunisians did not figure on the list of the first 10 nationalities of UASC who arrived by sea to Italy in 2017, from January to September 2018, they were first in the ranking, with 770 new arrivals.

Since no respondent below the age of 18 was interviewed for this assessment, the voices of children in this assessment are underrepresented. Nevertheless, their presence in respondents' journeys emerges from the findings below:

- More than a quarter of the respondents who left irregularly between 2011 and 2016 and after 2017 mentioned having travelled with at least one child on the boat. One 23-year-old male respondent who left in 2016 from Greater Tunis reported having crossed with five Tunisian UASC: "We were all Tunisians; a married couple with their two children, 4 older men and 5 teenagers aged between 15 and 16 years old."
- Among respondents, four were children when they left between 2011 and 2016 (3/4) and after 2017 (1/4).

The perception that the phenomenon of child migration is on the rise was reported both by Tunisian emigrants and KIs interviewed for this study, who highlighted an increase in the number of irregular migrant children since 2017. This was explained by both groups of respondents as also possibly linked to the perception that children would not be forcibly returned to Tunisia. A 30-year old respondent who left in 2013 from Greater Tunis reported:

"As I am little and I look younger than my real age, [when I was] in Lampedusa, I went to the authorities and said that I was 16 years old and I was treated as a minor. They took me to a centre for minors in Naples where a host family came to adopt me."

Nevertheless, several reliable sources point to [broader explanations](#) about the generational feeling of hopelessness and the lack of prospects for the future among Tunisian youth, linked to the increase in the rate of youth unemployment and the deteriorating economic situation in Tunisia.

UNHCR, [Italy - Unaccompanied and Separated Children \(UASC\) Dashboard](#), December 2017

UNHCR, [Italy - Unaccompanied and Separated Children \(UASC\) Dashboard](#), September 2018

Djaziri M., [En Tunisie, un peuple démoralisé, une jeunesse révoltée et des élites paralysées](#), The Conversation, 18 January 2018.

More than half of respondents reported having paid up to 5,000 Tunisian dinars to a smuggler to go to Italy.⁴⁴ Half of respondents left in 2017-2018 reported having disbursed between 1,000 and 2,500 TND (12/23), while one quarter reportedly spent more: between 2,500 and 5,000 TND (6/23).⁴⁵ Among respondents who left in 2011-2016, one fifth reported having paid between 1 and 1000 TND (11/53),⁴⁶ another third between 1,000 and 2,500 (12/53) and another fifth reported having paid between 2,500 and 5,000. Only three people - two left in 2011-2016 and one in 2017-2018 - reported having paid more than 5,000 USD.

The payment modality of the remaining number of respondents tells about the social dimension of Tunisian emigration. Four out of 24 respondents who left in 2017-2018 had their journeys paid by a family member, while amongst those who left in 2011-2016, eight respondents had their journey paid by a neighbour or a friend. A few respondents also reported having supported their smuggler recruiting other passengers for the journey. By working as *joker*, the

"Everybody talks about it and everybody left. It's no secret, Neighbours, friends, family, they all left. I knew about it my whole life. Even my little sister, who is in elementary school, saw the brother of her friend, who emigrated, bringing her gifts every time he would be back. So she came to me and asked: "Her brother left. And you? When are you leaving?"

37-year old man from Medenine, left in 2018

Tunisian smuggling jargon to refer to recruiters, they thus succeeded in paying less or having a free ride to Europe (6/56 left in 2011-2016, 2/24 left in 2017-2018). Two respondents who left in 2011-2016 reported having made an in-kind payment for their journey.

Besides resorting to a smuggler, some respondents coming from coastal areas who left in 2017-2018 reported having organised their journeys thanks to their own or their acquaintances' sailing skills. A small group of

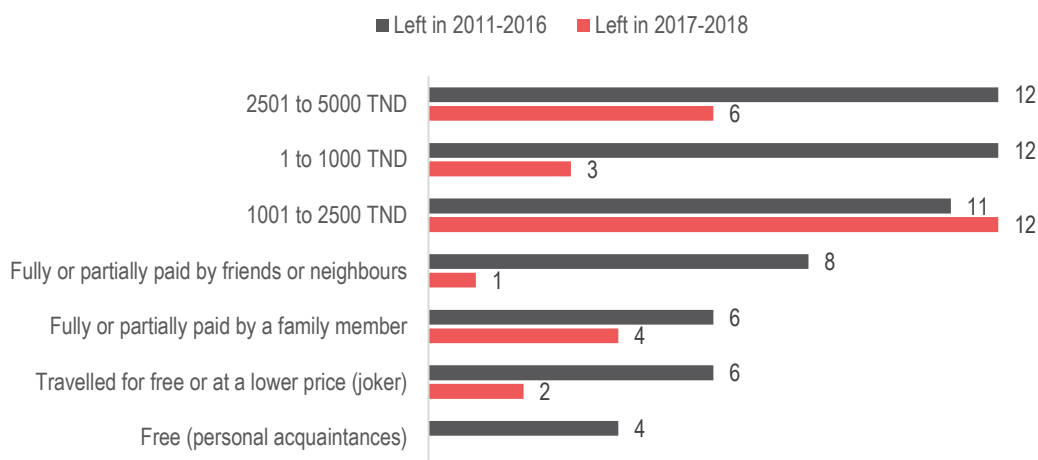
⁴⁴ As of 22 November, one United States Dollar (USD) equalled 3.33 Tunisian Dinars (TND). For more information please see the website of the Central Bank of Tunisia: <https://www.bct.gov.tn/bct/siteprod/index.jsp?la=AN>.

⁴⁵ A total of 23 respondents who left in 2017-2018 to reach Europe via sea and.

⁴⁶ A total of 53 respondents who left in 2011-2016 to reach Europe via sea and.

respondents collected 4,000 TND to buy the engine of the boat (4/23), other respondents stole a boat (3/23), while in one case, the respondent left with his own boat (1/23) to go to Italy.

Figure 16: Most commonly reported payment modalities



Total: 76 respondents who reached Europe by boat.

Box 4: A small window on migrant smuggling slang

A jargon specific to the phenomenon of **harka** [/ˈhɑrqa/], the irregular migration via sea from North Africa to Europe emerges from the accounts of respondents. Specific roles linked to the structure of the smuggling network are evoked:

- **Joker** [/ʒɔkˈɛ:r/]: people reportedly responsible for recruiting new passengers in exchange for a free or cheaper ride to Europe. Eight respondents worked as jokers. A 51-year old man left in 2011 from the Greater Tunis explained: *“I was in the café when a friend told me that his brother was looking for me. When I found him he told me: Look, I know you don't have any money. Help me find ten more people and you can go as **joker**.”*
- **Raggas**: [/ræˈgɑ:s/] were described as more established intermediaries or facilitators along the smuggling chain, in charge of:
 - Recruiting passengers for the boat journey in exchange for a commission;
 - Ensuring communication with passengers before the departure;
 - Processing payments;
 - Enabling transportation to connection houses or embarkation points.

Five respondents reported dealing with a raggas before their departure. In the words of a 37-year old woman who left in 2013: *“I stole my mother's jewelry, sold it and went to the **raggas** to give him the money [...]. He told me to wait for his call for instructions.”*

- Respondents also described how they stayed in secluded connection houses, called **gouna** [/ˈgu:næ/] waiting for the right moment to embark on their journeys to Europe. Respondents reported having waited there, on average, for periods from one to ten days:
 - As part of a strategy from the smuggler to ensure secrecy and avoid any information leak about the smuggling operation;
 - Wait for the critical number of migrants to be reached for the boat to leave;
 - Wait for the best weather conditions and/or lack of surveillance to be able to board the boat.

Twenty respondents declared having stayed in a **gouna** (20/80). Four of them reported not having enjoyed freedom of movement during their stay (4/20), while three respondents described the poor conditions of the house (3/20). Among them, a 28-year old man who left in 2018 from Medenine reported:

*“A guy picked me up with a truck and took me to the **gouna** [...]. Conditions there were horrible. There were a lot of people [...]. The house was rotten, they would come once a day to bring some food and water. I stayed there for days. I would sneak out at night to go to a mosque nearby to take a shower.”*

2. Life in Europe

This chapter provides an overview of the conditions faced by Tunisian respondents once in Europe. It provides an overview of Tunisians' livelihoods and challenges in Europe and analyses Tunisians' decisions and circumstances of return. The findings presented in this chapter refer to FGDs, KIs and interviews with **74 Tunisians** who reached Europe irregularly since 2011.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Most respondents entered Europe through Italy (71/74), or France (3/74) and spent short periods of time in Europe, which restrained their ability to secure financial resources.** Once in Europe, less than one quarter of respondents reported being employed in licit activities.
- The most commonly reported challenges in Europe included: having faced risky journeys to reach Europe (15/74) and, once there, not having access to shelter (18/74), facing language barriers (8/74) or not having food (5/74).
- Forced returnees had very limited information about their returns. Most of them were forcibly returned because they were **already in migrant centres with no freedom of movement** or in the framework of **routine immigration checks**.
- AVR and individual returnees were all facing **unfavourable conditions** when they started considering the option to return. The decision to return was triggered by the fact of knowing about the existence of AVR schemes or by specific personal circumstances such as a relative's illness or a divorce.

2.1. Once in Europe

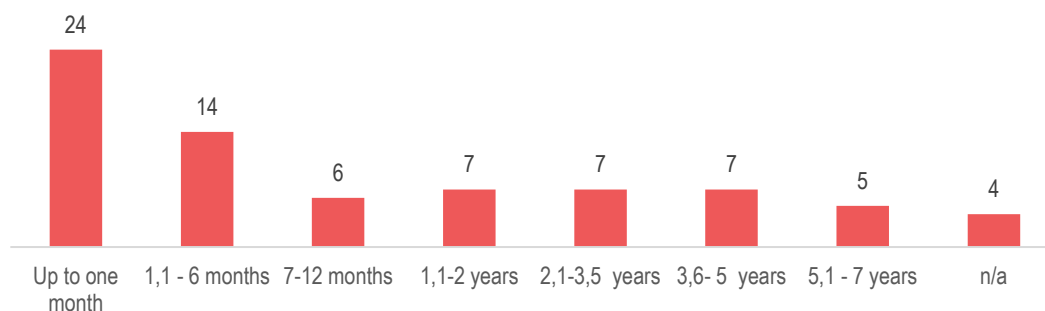
2.1.1. Primary and secondary mobility in Europe

For almost all respondents (71/74),⁴⁷ Italy was the gateway to Europe, followed by France (3/74). In the latter case, respondents had reached France by plane and overstayed their visa-free travel period. **Only very few respondents had fragmented secondary journeys through Europe.** Once in Europe, Italy remained the actual destination of 56 out of 74 respondents, while 13 respondents transited through Italy to reach France (13/74). A very limited number of respondents continued their journeys to Belgium (3/74), Spain (2/74) and Germany (1/74).

2.1.2. Average length of stay at destination

Respondents spent, on average, a short time in Europe before returning to Tunisia, which restrained their ability to secure economic or social resources at destination and improve their pre-departure conditions. One third of respondents reported spending in Europe from a few days up to a month (24/74), mostly because they had been apprehended by the police upon arrival, or short after reaching Europe and were forcibly repatriated to Tunisia. Another quarter of respondents spent in Europe between one and six months. Only 19 respondents out of 74 spent more than two years at destination.

Figure 17: Respondents' average length of stay in Europe



Total: 70 respondents who reached Europe out of 74. Four respondents did not specify their length of stay.

⁴⁷ Six respondents failed to reach Europe. Hence, the total here is out of 74.

2.1.3. Respondents' livelihoods in Europe

Once in Europe, only 20 out of 74 respondents managed to find employment. For half of them, the work found at destination was reportedly unstable or insufficient to enable the respondent to be economically independent (9/74).

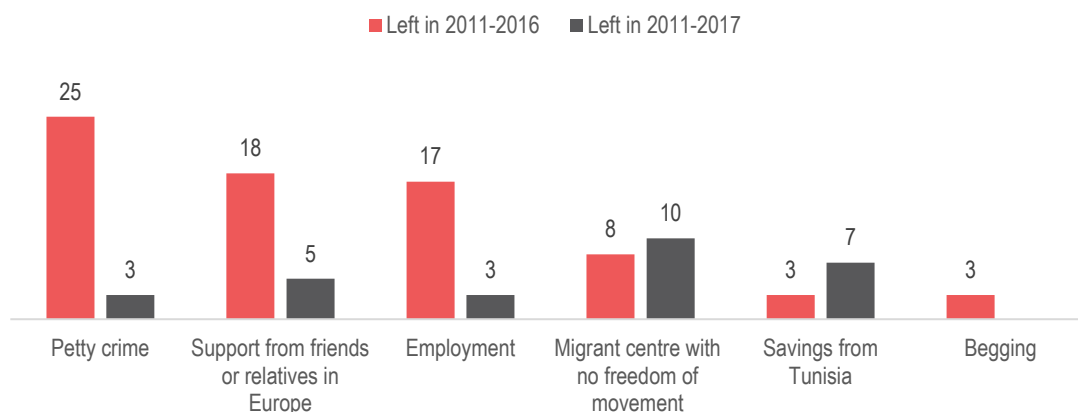
More than half of respondents who found employment at destination (11/20), although often unstable, had spent from two to seven years in Europe. The majority of respondents reported, instead, having been involved in petty crime (28/74), mostly due to their inability to find any kind of licit activities to make ends meet. Respondents reportedly experienced challenges to find employment at destination, especially regular ones, probably also due to the short period of time and the limited knowledge of the context.

Most reported livelihoods in Europe:

- Petty crime (28/74)
- External support (23/74)
- Employment (20/74)

Another quarter of respondents were brought, upon arrival to Italy, to migrant centres where they had no freedom of movement⁴⁸ (18/74), which did not allow them to carry out any income-producing activity. Similarly, among respondents who left in 2017-2018, a slightly higher proportion of respondents relied on savings brought from Tunisia (7/74). Counting on the support of social networks of family and friends at destination was reportedly a source of economic support for one third of respondents (25/74).

Figure 18: Most commonly reported sources of livelihoods in Europe among respondents who left in 2011-2016 and in 2017-2018



Total: 74 respondents who reached Europe. Multiple answers could apply.

2.1.4. Respondents' social network at destination

As indicated earlier in the report, **62 out of 74 respondents reported having a family member or an acquaintance at destination, which in some cases translated into an important source of direct or indirect economic support.** Sixteen out of 74 respondents, for example, reported having accessed housing for free thanks to someone they knew since before leaving Tunisia or thanks to chance encounters in Europe. Often, the latter were migrants from the same nationality who offered to help by providing accommodation, food, facilitating access to employment or even lending respondents some money.

Only five respondents were able to get married or have children while in Europe (5/74), most likely due to the limited length of stay at destination, and to the lack of economic stability.

" I suffer from diabetes. I used to work nine hours a day and would come home every day exhausted and feeling very sick. My blood sugar levels were always high, seizures occurred to me almost daily and I didn't have papers to access my medicines. Luckily, I had an Algerian colleague who would order it for me."

26-year old woman from the Greater Tunis, left in 2016

⁴⁸ Depending on respondents' time of arrival to Italy, these mostly included: Identification and Expulsion Centres (CIE), Centres for Permanence before Return (CPR) and EU hotspots.

2.1.5. Respondents' most commonly reported challenges faced in Europe

For many respondents, **the challenges faced in Europe started with interviewed Tunisians' perilous journey to their intended destination, which were likely to affect their ability to cope with hardship in their daily lives in Europe.** Despite an elevated level of risk awareness, one quarter of respondents explained how their journeys had been difficult and scary (15/74), dominated by the fear of drowning due to issues with the engine, because the boat was overloaded or due to confrontations with the maritime authorities in high waters. Two respondents reported having seen people drowning. Two other people explicitly mentioned how such events had affected their mental health and their ability to cope with stress. It is extremely plausible to imagine that more respondents than reported had been psychologically affected by such traumatising events.

"Before arriving to Lampedusa, water started penetrating the boat. At some point, when the water completely invaded the boat, people started screaming and asking for help.

I was with six people in the sea, we swam for almost 5 or 6 hours in the sea to reach Lampedusa. I couldn't get that scene out of my head. We arrived exhausted."

26-year old man from the Greater Tunis, left in 2017

"We weren't treated that well, but I heard that they are usually nice. [...] In the centre, they feed you and give you clothes. [...] A fight broke down in the centre. I wasn't part of the fight. The next morning, the police came with the translators [...] and took us to another centre. Almost everyone who goes there is sent back home."

More than one quarter of respondents who were taken to migrant centres with no freedom of movement at destination reported facing difficult living conditions (5/15). Conditions reportedly were described as worsening, whenever the centres got overcrowded.

Overall respondents reported struggling to respond to their primary needs. For 18 out of 74 respondents, access to shelter was the main preoccupation. While some respondents reported relying on the support of their families or their friends at destination (16/74), many reported having spent periods of their lives homeless, which pushed them to seek refuge in abandoned houses or wherever they could find some protection from cold (3/74) and insecurity in the European streets (5/74).

Seeing other Tunisian nationals sleeping on the street, in miserable conditions, often many years since their first arrival in the country of destination, was frequently described as a shocking experience, and even triggered the decision of some to return.

Respondents also reported not having enough to eat (5/74), others felt sick at destination (5/74) but had problems accessing healthcare (2/74). The lack of money was explicitly reported as a concern by 6 out of 74 respondents who had no access to any economic resources at destination, but it was overall a preoccupation shared among almost all respondents.

More than one quarter of respondents reported having faced challenges in interacting with their host society. Language barriers (8/74), discrimination (3/74) and challenges to adapt to an environment considered unwelcoming (5/74) were among the most reported causes. Finally, 6 out of 74 respondents reported having felt lonely, while among those who could rely on a social network, four lost the support of their families and fewer respondents faced issues within their household at destination.

Most commonly reported challenges in Europe:

- Risky journey to Europe (15/74)
- No access to shelter (18/74)
- Language barriers (8/74)
- No food (5/74)

2.2. Different notions and modalities of return

Return policies have been increasingly gaining ground on European political agendas.⁴⁹ There is, however, no agreement on the definition and categorisation of return and especially on the notion of voluntariness.⁵⁰ **As all the respondents in this assessment faced unfavourable conditions in Europe leading to their return, this**

⁴⁹ De Bono D., [The EU's emphasis on migrant returns has some serious human rights problems](#), The Conversation, 10 April 2017.

⁵⁰ Kuschminder K., [Reintegration Strategies: Conceptualizing How Return Migrants Reintegrate](#), 2017.

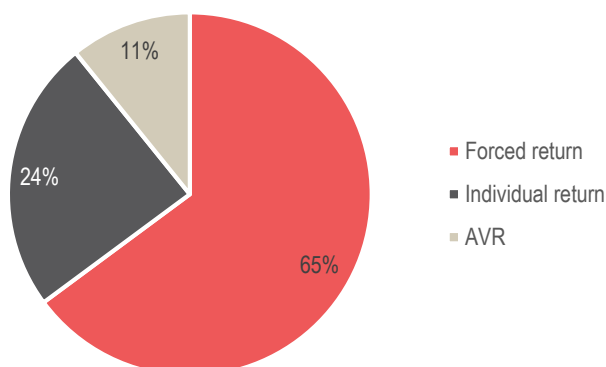
assessment will not try to assess whether the conditions at destination allowed to make voluntary choices about return. For the purposes of this assessment, the following categories of return will be used instead:

- **Individual return:** it includes both those who returned by regular means and those who went to the police or to the Tunisian consulate on their own initiative to return home. This is different from the EU notion of “voluntary return”, which means “compliance with the obligation to return within the time-limit fixed for that purpose in the return decision”.⁵¹ Hence, this includes both those who might have felt having completed their migration cycle and those who faced not fully favourable conditions at destination.
- **Assisted voluntary return (AVR)** is defined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as “a return to the country of origin based on an informed decision freely taken by the individual”.⁵² It includes a component of administrative, logical and financial support which is provided to migrants who are unable or unwilling to remain in the host country. Where possible, returnees are supported with reintegration measures (Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration), which typically include in-kind assistance prior to departure or after arrival assistance to obtain travel documents, in-cash assistance at the point of departure or after arrival and in-kind assistance in the country of return.⁵³
- **Forced return,** also called “removal”, “expulsion”, or “deportation” consists in the involuntary return of a migrant following the issuance of a removal order.⁵⁴ In the framework of this assessment, it includes all respondents who were notified such an order of expulsion, regardless of the removal order having been enforced.

2.2.1. How did respondents return home?

Almost two thirds of respondents were forcibly returned to Tunisia (48/74), followed by almost one quarter who returned on their own initiative (18/74) and a smaller group of 8 out of 74 respondents who returned through AVR schemes.

Figure 19: Proportions of respondents by modality of return



Total: 74 respondents who returned from Europe to Tunisia through forced return (48/74), individual return (18/74) and assisted voluntary return – AVR (8/74).

2.3. Forced returns

Readmission agreements are one of the most common frameworks to facilitate the removal of “persons who do not or no longer fulfil the conditions of entry to, presence in or residence in the requesting state”. They generally consist in an exchange among states where one party agrees to readmit its nationals living without authorisation in the other country, in exchange for incentives such as visa facilitation or funding in various areas.⁵⁵ Tunisia was the first

⁵¹ Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals.

⁵² International Organization for Migration (IOM), “[Return migration: Policies and practices in Europe](#)”, United Nations Publications, 2004.

⁵³ Latek, Marta, “[Reintegration of returning migrants](#)”, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), 2017.

⁵⁴ Cassarino J., “[Hiérarchie de priorités et système de réadmission dans les relations bilatérales de la Tunisie avec les États membres de l'Union européenne](#)”, Maghreb et sciences sociales 2012, Études.

⁵⁵ European Parliament Think tank, [EU Readmission Agreements: Facilitating the return of irregular migrants](#), 24 April 2015.

North African country which concluded a readmission agreement with a European country, and intensified its cooperation through a plurality of both bilateral and multilateral, standard and non-standard agreements.⁵⁶

Eurostat figures show that in 2011, the number of forced returns⁵⁷ to Tunisia increased by 359% compared to 2010, passing from 2,535 to 9,105.⁵⁸ While forced returns progressively decreased by an average rate of 80% in the years from 2012 to 2016, 2017 saw a new surge of 133% more forced returns compared to the previous year, passing from 2,940 in 2016 to 3,905 in 2017.⁵⁹ France and Italy were the countries who forcibly returned more Tunisian nationals from 2011 to 2017, with 11,010 and 19,225 individuals forcibly returned respectively.⁶⁰

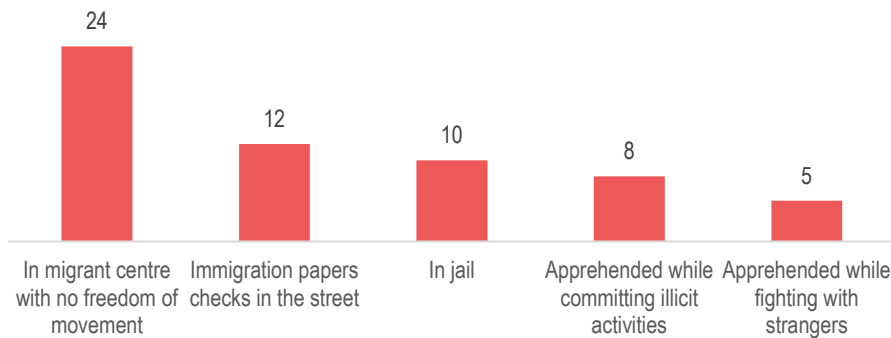
2.3.1. Circumstances of apprehension and notification of forced return

The majority of respondents who returned forcibly, were notified about their repatriation while they were in migrant centres with no freedom of movement (24/74) or in jail (10/74). On the other hand, among those who were enjoying freedom of movement, the majority was apprehended in the street (12/74), mostly in the framework of routine immigration checks. Fewer respondents were apprehended while committing illicit activities (8/74) or during a street brawl (5/74).

Circumstances of apprehension for forced return:

- Migrant centres with no freedom of movement (27/74)
- Routine immigration checks (12/74)
- Jail (10/74)

Figure 20: Most commonly reported circumstances of notification of forced return



Total: 74 respondents who reached Europe.

Respondents who forcibly returned had a very limited time to prepare to their return. A total of two thirds of respondents were notified their order of removal the same day that the forced return took place (15/48) or up to three days before (18/48) allegedly to reduce the risk that they would escape or resist. Only very few respondents learned about their expulsion one month (2/48) or three weeks (1/48) before their return occurred. In these cases, the abrupt enforcement of the return decision and the lack of information offered to forced returnee respondents about the journey and the conditions upon return in Tunisia did not allow for planning.

"I didn't choose to come back, I didn't think about it. When you cross the sea aiming for a better life you don't think about going back before realising your goals or making money"

37-year old man from Medenine, left in 2018

⁵⁶ Please refer to: Cassarino J., "Hiérarchie de priorités et système de réadmission dans les relations bilatérales de la Tunisie avec les États membres de l'Union européenne", Maghreb et sciences sociales 2012, Études and Cassarino, Jean-Pierre. "Unbalanced Reciprocities: Cooperation on Readmission in the Euro-Mediterranean Area." 2010.

⁵⁷ Eurostat refers to "third country nationals returned following an order to leave" as "Third country nationals who have in fact left the territory of the Member State, following an administrative or judicial decision or act stating that their stay is illegal and imposing an obligation to leave the territory (see Art. 7.1 (b) of the Council Regulation (EC) no 862/2007)."

⁵⁸ Eurostat database, [Third country nationals returned following an order to leave – annual data](#), last accessed: 26/11/2018.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

2.4. AVR

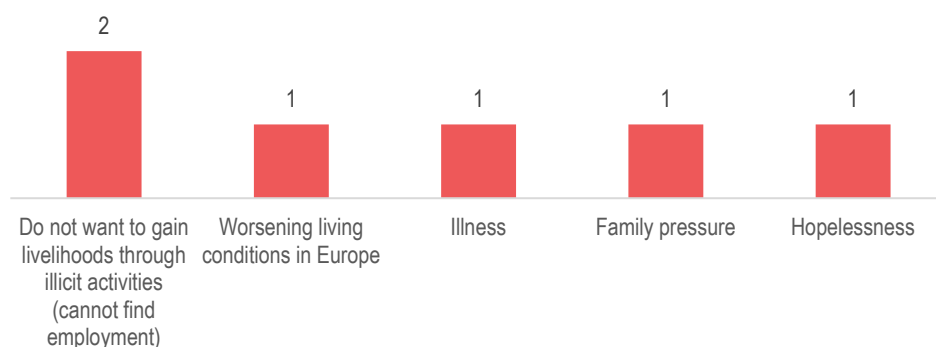
It is generally agreed that AVR is a more dignified, humane and cost-effective approach to traditional forced return.⁶¹ Nevertheless, despite the increased emphasis on this return modality, there is no harmonised approach to the implementation of assisted voluntary return programmes. The criteria regulating applicants' eligibility as well as the modalities of support and reintegration they receive prior to and after return are regulated by the different promoting entities. The majority of AVR programmes are administered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), but also by governmental bodies and to a smaller extent by non-governmental organisations.⁶²

Regardless of the plurality of schemes, all AVR schemes foresee at least the in-kind payment of the flight ticket to the participant's country of origin.⁶³ Some also include some reintegration measures (assisted voluntary return and reintegration - AVRR). Of the 69,195 AVRs facilitated by IOM in 2015, more than one third received reintegration assistance prior to or post arrival as part of AVRR schemes.⁶⁴

2.4.1. Drivers of respondents' decisions to return through AVR

Respondents' decisions about AVR were reportedly all taken in the context of unfavourable living conditions and were linked to general perceptions of hardship at destination, either driven by external or personal conditions.

Figure 21: Top five most commonly reported drivers to respondents' decisions about AVR



Total: 8 respondents who returned through AVR.

Respondents reported that their final decisions to return home were triggered either by the fact of learning about the existence of AVR programmes, or by specific circumstances, such as having been evicted from the place where respondents were living or learning about a relative's illness or death.

Figure 22: Most commonly reported triggers to respondents' decisions about AVR



Total: 8 respondents who returned through AVR.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² The respondents for this assessment made explicit reference to the support received by IOM and the French Office for Immigration and Integration – OFII.

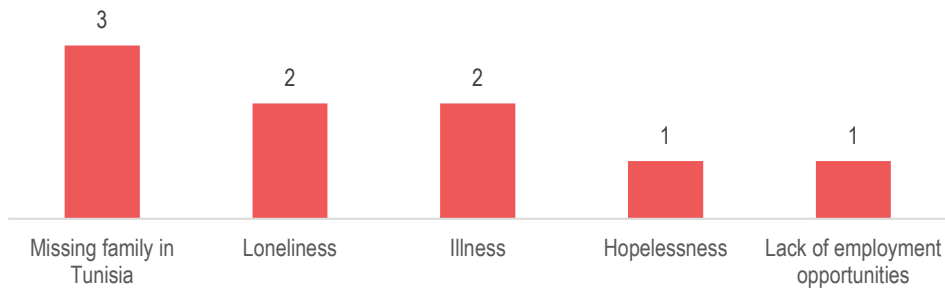
⁶³ Cherti M., [Is 'voluntary' return the new way forward for managing irregular migration?](#), 21 February 2017.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

2.5. Individual return

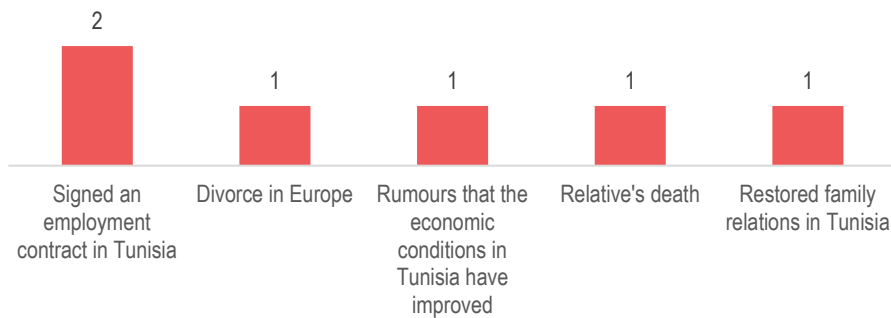
The drivers of respondents' choices to return on their own initiative are sparse and comparable to those of AVR returnees. In a similar vein, individual returns did not take place as the result of a completed migration cycle. **They were triggered, instead, by specific events, such as having found employment in Tunisia, or by personal events such as a divorce or the death or illness of a close relative in Tunisia**, whereby the respondent felt that the costs of staying in Europe would outweigh the benefits of returning.

Figure 23: Most commonly reported drivers of decisions about individual return



Total: 18 respondents who returned through individual return.

Figure 24: Most commonly reported triggers to the decision to return on respondents' own initiative

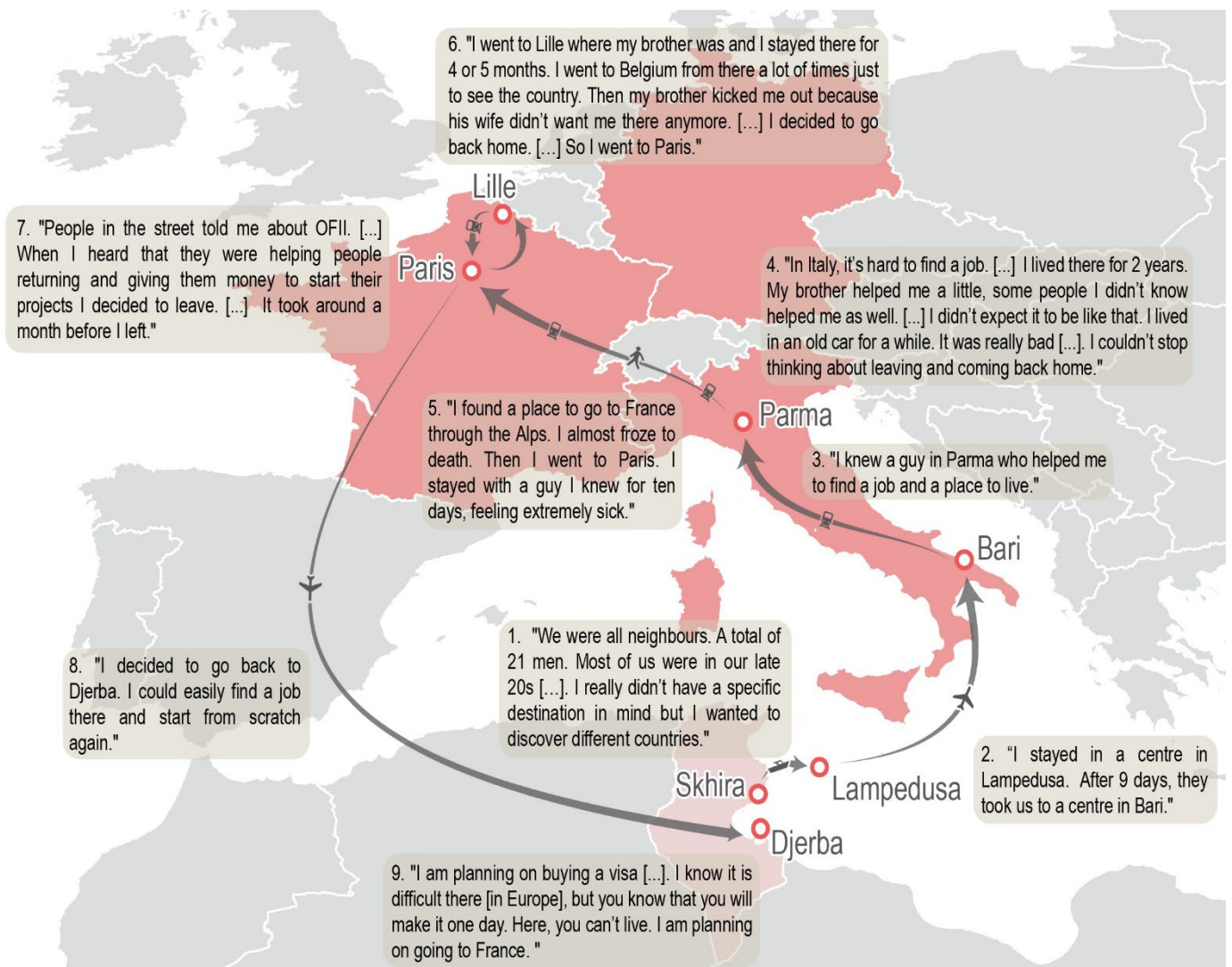


Total: 18 respondents who returned through individual return.

2.5.1. Respondents' return journeys to Tunisia

The vast majority of respondents returned to Tunisia by plane (62/74) and a smaller number returned by boat (12/74). All respondents who were forcibly returned arrived to the airport of Enfidha, in the governorate of Sousse, mostly on charter flights, with the exception of one respondent who returned to the Carthage Airport in Tunis. For the other return modalities, respondents returned to the airport or to the port of Tunis.

Case study 2: How challenges at destination affected a young Tunisian's man decision to return through AVR



3. Back in Tunisia

This chapter provides an overview of the livelihoods and challenges of Tunisian returnees since 2011. It explores the immediate conditions upon return, the obstacles faced on a daily basis, the circumstances, the decision-making process about return and the intentions to re-emigrate. This section is based on data collected through interviews with **74 returnees**.

KEY FINDINGS

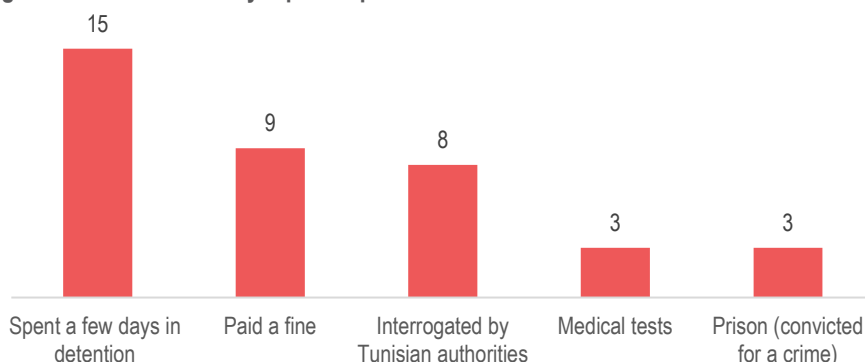
- Upon arrival in Tunisia, forcibly returned respondents reported having spent a few days in custody (15/48), having paid a fine (9/48), or having been interrogated by the police (8/48).
- Most challenges upon return included economic hardship, unemployment and strained relations with the host community. Overall, return was associated with negative feelings and discontent.
- The vast majority of respondents reported intending to re-emigrate in the future.

3.1. Once in Tunisia

3.1.1. At the airport upon return

What happens once returnees are back to their countries of origin - especially if they were forcibly returned - is not extensively covered by secondary sources. Among those who participated in this study and who were forcibly returned, **around one third reported having spent a few days in custody (15/48), almost one fifth paid a fine (9/48), while others were only interrogated by the police (8/48)**. Eight respondents also reported having faced bad treatment, mostly verbal aggression, by the police (8/48). This was also the case for one respondent who returned on his own initiative (1/18) and one who returned through AVR (1/8).

Figure 25: Most commonly reported practices at immediate arrival in Tunisia



Total: 48 respondents who were forcibly returned. Multiple answers could apply.

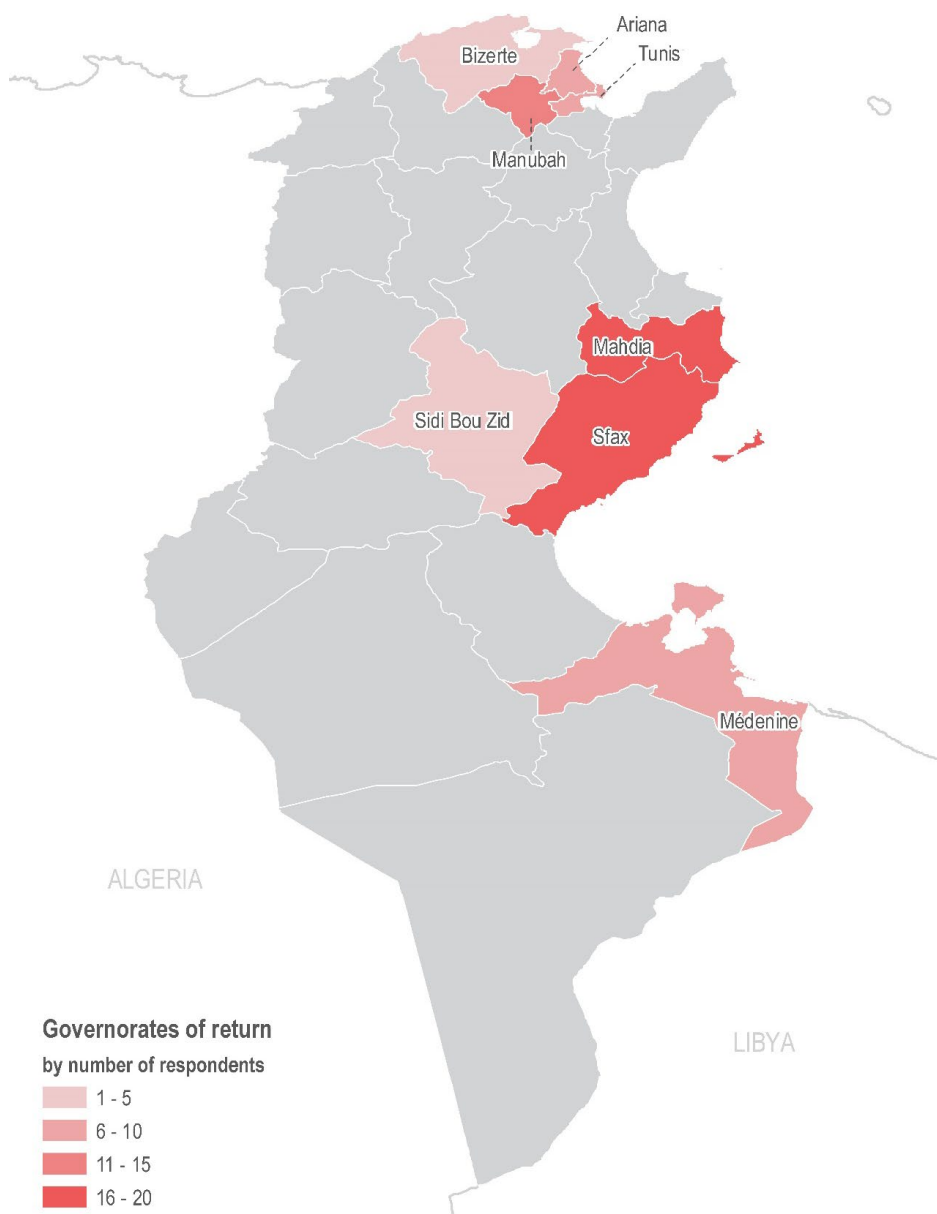
3.1.2. Where did respondents return and why?

In line with what reported by KIs and secondary data, **almost all respondents returned to the governorates where they were living before departure (71/74)**. In most cases, the return area also corresponded to the place where the family was located (43/74). Respondents reported **returning to those areas specifically because they felt they had nowhere else to go (33/74), to receive the economic and moral support from their family (32/74)**, because they felt they needed to be in a **familiar place (4/74)** or because they expected to **find a job more easily (3/74)**. Even when respondents returned to other locations, some still spent a few weeks up to a few months with their families before moving elsewhere (4/74). On the contrary, the three respondents who returned to different areas prior to their departure, did so to limit interaction with people they knew, including their families.

Why returning to the areas of residence from before departure?

- Nowhere else to go (33/74)
- Moral and economic family support (33/74)
- Need to be in a familiar place (4/74)

Figure 26: Respondents' governorates of return



3.2. Conditions upon return in Tunisia

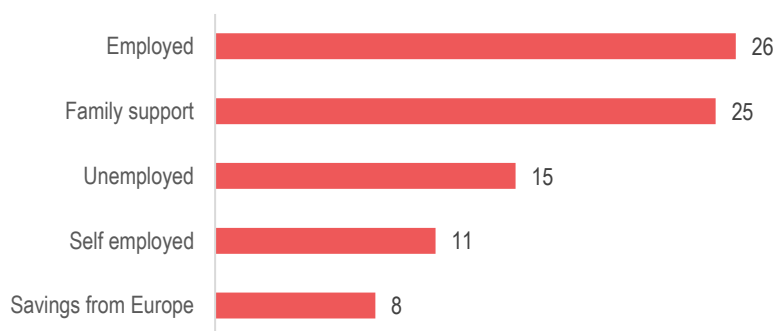
3.2.1. Respondents' livelihoods upon return

Upon return, returnees reported being employed in low or middle skilled occupations (26/74) or were self-employed (11/74). One third reported to be heavily relying on their families' direct or in-kind economic support (25/74). One fifth of respondents also reported being unemployed. Reliance on family economic support was found to be higher than the employment rate among respondents who recently returned home, compared to people who returned years before. This points to the challenges faced by respondents who had no time, nor information to plan their return in advance - such as forced returnees - but also by those who faced unfavourable conditions at destination, who returned not because the conditions in Tunisia were ripe but because the costs of staying would be higher than those of leaving.

Livelihoods upon return:

- Dependent work (26/74)
- Family support (25/74)
- Self-employment (11/74)

Figure 27: Most commonly reported sources of livelihoods upon return



Total: 48 respondents who were forcibly returned. Multiple answers could apply.

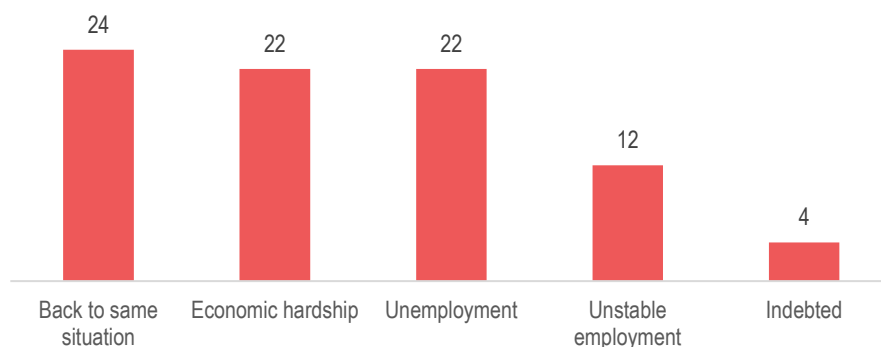
3.2.2. Respondents' challenges upon return

Upon return, respondents' most commonly reported challenges referred to their socio-economic situation back in Tunisia. The feeling of having started anew was mentioned by one third of respondents (24/74) and slightly less than a third of respondents reported facing economic hardship (22/74). Finding employment (22/74) or working in unstable forms of employment (12/74) also figured among respondents' most reported challenges.

Most reported socio-economic challenges upon return:

- Economic hardship (22/74)
- Unemployment (22/74)
- Unstable employment 12/74)

Figure 28: Respondents' most commonly reported socio-economic challenges



Total: 48 respondents who were forcibly returned. Multiple answers could apply.

Fewer respondents also reported having faced legal constraints upon their return. These mostly referred to their inability to access public employment in the future (3/74) and to legally reach Europe again after having returned voluntarily or forcibly (2/74). Fewer respondents also reported how return had affected their relationship with their own families in Tunisia or in Europe. Four respondents reported having left their family or spouse behind in Europe (4/74), while six respondents reported having stressful relationships with their families or the partners' relatives since their return (9/74). Three of them specifically referred to their families' discontent about their return (3/9), which they saw as a failure. Finally, respondents reported facing psychological distress and loneliness (4/74), using negative coping strategies, such as consuming illicit substances (3/74).

3.2.3. Respondents' interaction with their host society

Despite the choice made by many respondents to return to their locations of origin, **the interaction with their host community was one of the biggest challenges they faced upon return.** Most respondents, especially those who returned to their families, reported being happy to see their beloved ones (25/74), but that a deep sense of discomfort emerged, especially with regards to their host community.

Research shows how society negative attitudes toward returnees and the feeling of not being accepted and stigmatised can affect returnees' mental stability and ability to reintegrate in their country of origin.⁶⁵ **Only 10 respondents reported feeling that families and acquaintances were happy about their return, plus an additional five respondents who reported enjoying a good relationship with their neighbours.** Some respondents felt negatively judged by their host communities (12/74) and other respondents reported having cut themselves out of their host community because of such strained relationships (13/74). Some respondents reportedly felt not accepted (6/12) or mocked (5/12) by other Tunisians. A few respondents felt that since they had returned, people had been avoiding them (2/74) or had been treating them differently than in the past (2/74).

"It was hard for me to readapt [to my host community]. People here don't tolerate those who returned by force, and not even those who returned voluntarily. They believe that Europe is heaven. Luckily my family has been helping me during this time."

29-year old man from the Mahdia, left in 2011

3.2.4. Respondents' feelings about return

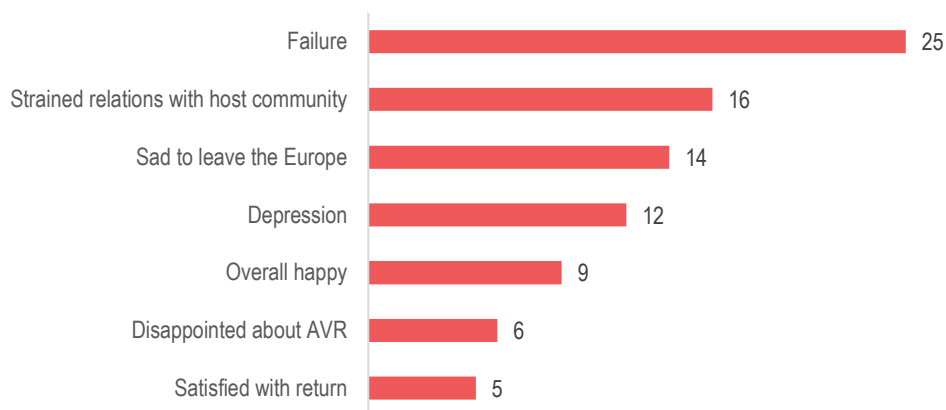
Migrants' mental health can be affected by factors linked to their migration process, such as reasons to return, type of travel, length of stay, and legal status.⁶⁶ Among respondents in this study, while some reported feeling happy (9/74) and fewer reported being satisfied to be back home (5/74),

"I am depressed. I feel I failed. I tried to kill myself. I need psychiatric assistance but also material help."

24-year old man from the Greater Tunis, left in 2017

one third of respondents reported associating the idea of return with sentiments of failure (25/74). A fifth of respondents reported feelings of rejection towards their society of origin (16/74), another fifth reportedly felt sad of having left Europe (14/74) and one sixth reported feelings of depression (12/74). Six respondents who returned through AVR reported feeling disappointed by their AVR experience (6/8), due to delays in receiving reintegration support or due to bureaucracy-related challenges.

Figure 29: Respondents' most commonly reported feelings associated with return



Total: 74 respondents who returned to Tunisia. Multiple answers could apply.

3.3. Future intentions of re-emigration

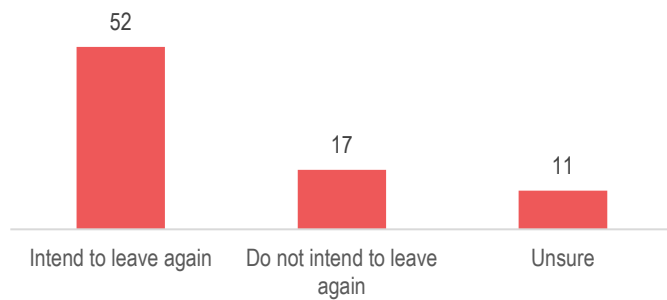
Almost two thirds of respondents reported intending to re-emigrate in the future (52/74). This is in line with research pointing to how the challenges and stress faced by returnees upon return, particularly with regards to unemployment and to perceptions of being a burden on the family's economy, could encourage them to seek new opportunities abroad again.⁶⁷ The intention to re-emigrate was reported by a slightly higher proportion of forced returnees (34/48), compared to respondents who returned on their own initiative (9/18) or through AVR (4/8).

⁶⁵ Marina de Regt et al., "[Deported before experiencing the good sides of migration: Ethiopians returning from Saudi Arabia, African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal](#)", 2015.

⁶⁶ Davies, A. et al., "[The dynamics of health and return migration](#)." PLoS medicine 8, no. 6. 2011.

⁶⁷ Davies, A. et al., "[The dynamics of health and return migration](#)." PLoS medicine 8, no. 6. 2011.

Figure 30: Respondents' future migratory intentions



Total: 74 respondents who returned to Tunisia.

Among the respondents who expressed their intention to re-emigrate, and who provided more clarifications, a slight relative majority reported intending to migrate regularly (13/44), followed by respondents who would re-emigrate by irregular means (12/44). Another 11 respondents also expressed the intention to reach Europe irregularly but in a safe way, for example, by marrying a European national, or overstaying their visas.

One respondent reported having already planned his re-emigration. Four expressed the intention to leave as soon as the opportunity emerged (4/44). In order to explain this strong inclination towards emigration, a key informant pointed to the ineffectiveness of deterrence in a context where unchanged pre-departure conditions add to harsh conditions at destination and abrupt returns. Not surprisingly, around nine returnees had already left more than once and up to four times (4/9).

CONCLUSION

Seven years after the major emigration upsurge that saw more than 20,000 Tunisians reaching Europe in a few months, a new peak in Tunisian irregular emigration has taken place since the second half of 2017. These recent emigration dynamics are closely linked to the social and economic transformation that the country has been going through in the last decades. There is large agreement on the linkage between Tunisia's poor macroeconomic performance, the political uncertainty and the discontent among Tunisian youth, who possibly used migration as a means to escape the unfavourable conditions back home. However, what individual factors activated Tunisian emigrants' decisions to emigrate irregularly in response to those structural conditions remain a scarcely explored area. In a similar vein, while the surge in irregular migration is associated to an equally important increase in returns, what happens once Tunisians return to Tunisia - forcibly, through AVR or on their own initiative - is also poorly documented. The study: "Tunisia, country of emigration and return: migration dynamics since 2011", conducted by REACH and Mercy Corps aimed to shed light on these knowledge gaps.

Key conclusions:

Overall, **the social discontent related to the conditions that fuelled the 2011 revolution was a dominant feature both of the migration outflows that occurred in 2011, and of the renewed spike in emigration in the years 2017-2018.** Poor socio-economic conditions, unemployment and a deterioration of Tunisians' living conditions were reported both among the structural and individual drivers behind respondents' decisions to emigrate. This means that respondents were not only reactive to their own individual experience of socio-economic discomfort but also to the collective dimension of frustration of the communities in which they lived.

The two emigration surges are likely to be linked to a generational crisis that is intensifying. Three findings suggest this. First of all, most of respondents – the majority of which was in their 20s or 30s before leaving – took the decision to migrate because they knew someone who had gone irregularly to Europe and had travelled with their peers. Secondly, many respondents, especially those who left more recently, reportedly suffered from a sense of inadequacy linked to a lack of means to build the future they wanted. In this sense, it is telling that one third of respondents who had left in 2017-2018 crossed into Europe after having been rejected by the families of the partners they wanted to build a family with. Thirdly, the feeling of hopelessness among young respondents permeates the accounts of the pre-departure drivers, of the conditions faced at destination and of the hardship faced upon return. Against a backdrop of perceived immobility, respondents reportedly decided to try their chance before worse conditions affected their ability to leave.

While respondents originated from areas where emigration was perceived as the norm and had extended networks of relatives and friends abroad, **the perception of having little to lose reportedly translated into sudden and poorly prepared journeys**, which also affected their conditions at destination.

Many respondents embarked on risky, irregular journeys not because it was their preferred option, but because it was perceived as the only chance they had to go to Europe. Some respondents reportedly had tried to apply for regular pathways to reach Europe or would have liked to, but were dissuaded by the costly application fees and the low chance of being granted one. Some respondents explicitly reported being frustrated by the perception that the few legal avenues available to reach Europe are reserved to people who are economically and socially well endowed. A sense of injustice emerged not only among those who were seeking better economic opportunities abroad, but also among those who wished to travel to satisfy their desire for adventure and discovery that is common among young people.

A lack of regular channels made respondents' journeys riskier, it complicated the adaptation period at destination and the prospects for development and successful integration back home. All returnee respondents either returned after having been notified an order of removal, or because they had faced unfavourable conditions in Europe. On average, they spent there only a short period of time, which restrained their ability to secure the financial and social resources to make their return home smoother. Only in a few cases, respondents reported having partially achieved their goals at destination. These cases concerned respondents who had returned on their own initiative and, after having spent more than a few months at destination, were able to capitalise on their experience to ameliorate their situation in Tunisia. Among them, a female returnee, who returned on her own initiative, explained how the financial resources secured in Europe enabled her to gain more consideration and decision-making power among her relatives back home.

A lack of information about return severely constrains returnees' opportunities to successfully reintegrate back home. The majority of respondents who forcibly returned were informed about their return the same day that they actually left, leaving them with no resources, nor time to plan the steps ahead. It is therefore not surprising that most of them chose to return home to their families to receive economic and moral support and were struggling to reach economic independence at the moment of data collection.

Return is not the ending phase of a migrant's experience, but the phase of a cycle that is likely to repeat itself, especially - but not only - if the circumstances that encouraged the first attempt to migrate persist. Mostly unhappy about their return conditions, affected by feelings of failure and relational stress, including negative attitudes from their host communities, the large majority of respondents in this study manifested their intention to re-emigrate. Many respondents reported feeling that their return corresponded to starting at ground zero and that they were ready to re-cross the sea. On the other hand, one third of respondents in this study had already migrated more than once.

Areas for further research:

- **Tunisian female emigration:** perceptions of an increase in Tunisian female emigration is not accompanied by strong evidence. More research should focus on the gender-specific factors behind female migrants' decision-making process, adaptation at destination and experiences of return.
- **Tunisian UASC:** figures on sea arrivals to Italy show that Tunisians were the most represented nationality among unaccompanied and separated children as of 30 December 2018.⁶⁸ No information is available, however, on the child-specific choices to migrate and on the protection risks they incur along the journeys to Europe.
- **Returnees and mental health:** despite the high rate of returns among Tunisian nationals, few studies have aimed to unpack the effects of return on the mental health of returnees once home. More efforts should be devoted to shed light on this nexus and on the coping mechanisms put in place, with a view to inform programmes geared toward an improvement of returnees' wellbeing.

⁶⁸ UNHCR, [Operational Data Portal – Italy](#), Most common nationalities of sea arrivals (since 1 January 2018), last accessed: 07/01/2019.

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